

THE BACK ALLEY WEBZINE

Volume III, Number 3

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NOTE FROM THE EDITOR

TIMES THAT JUST GRIND YOU DOWN TO THE HUBS

It's been a tough year so far here in The Back Alley. The wrenching nostalgic tones of *Auld Lang Syne* had barely stopped resonating in our ears before we received the saddening news that one of the absolute greats in the business, Robert B. Parker, had left us for the Bar In The Sky, taking with him some of our most beloved protagonists, including Spenser and Hawk, Jesse Stone, and Virgil Cole and Everett Hitch (for the moment, we'll ignore Sunny Randall...). An English scholar, Parker completed his doctoral dissertation on the foundations of the hardboiled hero, citing works from James Fenimore Cooper's Natty Bumppo to the immortal prose of the holy trinity of Hammett, Chandler, and Ross Macdonald. Little did he know that he would eventually become the fourth pillar in the PI genre.

I met Bob Parker just once, at the Sleuthfest Mystery Conference in Fort Lauderdale several years back. He had just finished discussing his dissertation in a panel presentation, and had mentioned that nobody had seen it in thirty years. I happened to have a copy of it in my briefcase, and we wound up signing next to each other in the bookroom. I asked him if he would autograph one of his works for me, and he graciously agreed. Imagine the look on his face when I pulled his 'long-lost' dissertation from my case and placed it in front of him! I think he chuckled over that one for five minutes.

Two years later, he was kind enough to provide a cover blurb for my Eamon Gold novel *Cordite Wine*. That novel earned my third Shamus Award nomination, and I can't help thinking that Parker's endorsement helped.

Several weeks ago, the mystery world--especially that part of it that treasures the independent booksellers in the business--was rocked by the sudden passing of David Thompson, the owner of Murder By The Book in Houston, Texas. It seemed impossible that someone as young as David, who had devoted over half his life to his treasured store, might be so untimely ripped from our midst. I didn't know David, but I was keenly aware of his influence as both a bookseller and as a publisher of some of the hardest-hitting crime prose on the shelves. Shortly after his death, I wrote my friend Reed Farrel Coleman to offer my condolences. Reed was one of David's close friends, and David had published some of his books. Reed assured me that I would have liked David and--perhaps more importantly--he would have liked me. I am truly sorry that I never had the opportunity to make this fine man's acquaintance. Here in The Back Alley, we'd like to offer our sincerest public condolences to his wife McKenna, and our hopes that she will find the strength to bear up under the weight of her loss.

Finally, close on the heels of losing David Thompson, we learned that the world of crime fiction had lost Stephen J. Cannell. For those of us who worship great private eye fiction, we recall Cannell as the creator of Jim Rockford of *The Rockford Files*. Having overcome severe dyslexia, Cannell became one of the best-regarded producers and screenwriters in Hollywood, but many forget that he was a hell of a novelist to boot. I had just finished reading *Three Shirt Deal*, one of his Shane Scully novels, when I heard that he had passed away. I've already loaded three more Scully titles on my Kindle, and I look forward to reading the entire series from the beginning.

Finally, on a more personal note, I lost my mother and my father-in-law within five weeks of each other since the release of the last issue of *The Back Alley Webzine*. That's one of the reasons this issue is a little delayed. Some things are more important than deadlines.

As crime fiction writers and publishers, we think we get used to the ever-present specter of Death. Sometimes, though, the grim reaper passes just a little too closely, and carries away our dearest blood. Here's hoping that the old boy will go easy on us for a while, and let us catch our breath. In the mean time, sit back, relax, and enjoy the outstanding lineup of authors we're presenting in this new issue.

Rick Helms - Editor

LINEUP FOR VOLUME III, NUMBER 3



O'NEIL DE NOUX, a real-life New Orleans police detective, has published seven novels, seven short story collections and over 200 short stories in the US and abroad. De Noux's short story "The Heart Has Reasons" won the Private Eye Writers of America's prestigious PWA Shamus Award for Best Short Story in 2007. His story "Too Wise" won the SMFS Derringer Award in 2009. His latest books are the novel *SLICK TIME* and collection *NEW ORLEANS NOCTURNAL*.



ANITA PAGE's story "Twas the Night" which appeared in *The Gift of Murder* (Wolfmont Press), won a Derringer award this year from the Short Mystery Fiction Society. Other stories have appeared in *The Prosecution Rests* (Little, Brown), *Murder New York Style* (L & L Dreamspell), *Word Riot*, *Mysterical-e*, *Mouth Full of Bullets*, *Ball State University Forum*, *Jewish Horizons* and *Heresies*. She worked as a freelance journalist in the Catskills, where much of her fiction takes place. She now lives in New York's Hudson Valley.



In the past two years MARK JOSEPH KIEWLAK's fiction has appeared in more than thirty magazines, including *Hardboiled*, *Plots With Guns*, *A Twist of Noir*, *Thuglit*, *The Bitter Oleander*, *CrimeSpree*, and many others. His story, "The Present," was nominated for the 2010 Spinetinger Award: Best Short Story on the Web. He has also written for DC Comics (*The Flash*).



FRED ZACKEL's mentor, the great Ross Macdonald, picked him from a crowd of authors at the 1975 Santa Barbara Writers' Conference. He is the author of *Cocaine and Blue Eyes* (1978) and *Cinderella After Midnight* (1980, along with numerous other novels and short stories). He teaches at Bowling Green State University in Ohio. Trivia buffs should note that the 1983 TV adaptation of *Cocaine and Blue Eyes* was co-produced by O.J. Simpson, who also starred as Zackel's detective, Michael Brennen. "Look at it this way," Zackel says: "I was discovered by Ross Macdonald and O.J. Simpson. That can haunt you in the wee hours of the night." *Cocaine and Blue Eyes* has been reissued by Point Blank Press.



WAYNE D. DUNDEE has six novels, three novellas, and over twenty short stories to his credit. All of the novels and most of the shorts have featured his PI protagonist Joe Hannibal, formerly operating out of northwest Illinois but now relocated (along with Dundee) to west central Nebraska. His work has been translated into several different languages and has been nominated (in various categories) for an Edgar, an Anthony, and six Shamus Awards. No winners, however, which makes him sort of the Susan Lucci of mystery fiction. In the mid-eighties he was the founder and original editor of *Hardboiled Magazine*.



SIMON WOOD is an ex-racing car driver, a licensed pilot and an occasional private investigator. He's had over 150 stories and articles published in a variety of magazine anthologies, such as *Seattle Noir*, *Thriller 2* and *Woman's World*. He is a frequent contributor to *Writer's Digest*. He is the 2007 winner of the Anthony Award, for his story "My Father's Secret" (*Crimespree Magazine*). Simon Wood's novels include *Working Stiffs*, *Accidents Waiting to Happen*, *Paying the Piper* and *We All Fall Down*. As 'Simon Janus', he is also the author of horror stories, including *The Scrubs* and *Road Rash*. His latest books are *Terminated* and *Asking For Trouble*. As if that wasn't enough, it has just been announced the Simon will be the Toastmaster at the 2014 Bouchercon in Long Beach, CA.



FRANK NORRIS holds a very special place in the history of noir fiction. Despite his relative lack of renown today, around the turn of the twentieth century he was setting the world on fire with his naturalistic, dark stories of doomed people.

His greatest contribution, however, came with the first volume of his projected three-volume epic tracing the role of wheat in society, *The Octopus*. Sadly, his trilogy was left unfinished when he died of complications from appendix surgery in 1901.

Continuing in this issue, we present Part Five of *McTeague*.

DISTURBING THE PEACE

by

O'Neil De Noux

O'Neil De Noux, a real-life New Orleans police detective, has published seven novels, seven short story collections and over 200 short stories in the US and abroad. De Noux's short story "The Heart Has Reasons" won the Private Eye Writers of America's prestigious PWA Shamus Award for Best Short Story in 2007. His story "Too Wise" won the SMFS Derringer Award in 2009. His latest books are the novel SLICK TIME and collection NEW ORLEANS NOCTURNAL.

I did it. I opened my big mouth and said it, and someone died.

Cruising alone in my blue-and-white patrol car along Tchoupitoulas Street, run down houses on my left, riverfront warehouses on my right, I yawned and then said it aloud, "It's too fuckin' quiet."

For a second the old New Orleans police saying flashed in my mind — "Don't ever say it's too quiet. If you do, someone's bound to get killed." That was the nature of the beast, living in the great southern murder capital of America. I shook off the thought for ten minutes, until the loud beep came on my radio, followed by the dispatcher's staccato voice — "Signal 103F. 3247 Tchoupitoulas. Third floor. Room 313. Any Sixth District Unit."

I punched the accelerator and picked up my microphone.

"604, Headquarters. I'm six blocks away."

"10-4."

Hot, humid air rushed through the open window of my unit as I quickly covered the blocks to the scene. At two a.m., on that un-typically calm Wednesday morning, there was no traffic along the warehouse district.

"Headquarters, 604. Complainant is anonymous. Called twice to report screaming and fighting in Room 313."

"10-4," I responded as I eased off the accelerator and pumped the brake, bringing my unit to a stop in front of a brown brick tenement near the corner of Tchoupitoulas and Toledano Streets.

"604, 10-97." I told headquarters I'd arrived.

"10-4. You want me to hold the air?"

"Negative." It was only a 103F — Disturbing the Peace by Fighting. In those days we didn't have portable radios. On shootings and stabbings and armed robbery-in-progress calls, the air was held for officers in danger. It was a judgment call, by the officer on the scene. I wasn't about to hold the air for a 103. No way, not Patrolman Dino LaStanza of the Bloody Sixth District, not the son of Captain LaStanza. Fuck, I'd volunteered to work that outcast police district right out of the academy. It was the shit, the toughest fuckin' district. Where the real men worked.

I put the mike down, grabbed my black steel Kel-lite flashlight and black plastic PR-24 nightstick, locked the car and bounded across the small, grassless front yard to the front door of the tenement. I slid my nightstick in its holder on my belt and flipped on my Kel-lite as I moved into the tenement's dark foyer. The place smelled like rotten cabbage, the air musty and wet. Dim yellow light illuminated the stairway from exposed bulbs overhead. The bulb on the second floor was out.

Arriving on the third floor, I noticed immediately that few of the rooms had numbers on their doors. I listened for the sounds of a fight, but the only sound was my footsteps. I found Room 313 half-way down the hall, its door marked with black Marks-a-lot. I leaned my ear close but could hear nothing inside. Taking a step to my right, away from the door, I reached over and tapped it with my Kel-lite, my right hand resting on my holstered .357 magnum. I was thinking how much I hated bogus calls.

I tapped a second time, louder.

An angry voice called out, "Huh? Who's there?"

"Police!"

"What?"

"Police. Open the damn door."

I heard stumbling and heavy breathing, then nothing.

I hit the door again with the Kel-lite, harder, sending a loud pop echoing down the hallway.

"OK. OK," the voice said, higher pitched now.

The door opened suddenly and a man who had to be six-six and two-fifty-plus stood in the doorway, like the trunk of an oak tree. Outweighing me by more than a hundred pounds, he was about a foot taller. Red-faced and wearing only red gym shorts, the man stood huffing, as if he'd just caught his breath. A puff of light brown hair crowned his huge head and a pair of narrow eyes leered at me.

"Everything all right in there?" I tried to look past him. The room was in shambles, brown sofa on its side, a broken lamp next to it, and papers all over the floor.

"Yeah," he said.

I looked at him again, just as he took in another breath. His mouth opened momentarily and something gold flashed inside. A thin, gold chain dangled from his mouth for a second before he sucked it back in.

"What's that in your mouth?"

He swallowed and said, "Nothin'!" He opened his mouth to show me.

"What the fuck happened in there?"

"Nothin'. I fell." He folded his large arms across his chest.

"Anyone else in there?"

"No."

"Mind if I take a look?"

A massive hand grabbed the door and he shook his head.

“I don’t believe a fuckin’ thing your saying.”

I pointed the end of the Kel-lite at his wide nose. He shook his head and closed the door slowly in my face. I heard him set the lock. I stepped back and looked at the doors down the hall. Often an anonymous caller will peek out to see what happened. No door opened.

Backing down the hall, I swung my light around again and saw something. I directed my light to the dirty, tile floor, and saw a trail. A drag mark led from the door of Room 313 all the way to the far end of the hall. I went down on my haunches and saw how my footprints were clearly marked in the dirt.

I moved closer to the drag mark, touched it and the dirt crumbled. Son-of-a-bitch, it was fresh. I followed it, making sure not to walk over it, all the way to an open window at the end of the hall. The window, with fresh splinters on its sill, opened to a fire-escape.

Leaning out, I shined my Kel-lite down the iron fire-escape, which didn’t reach all the way to the ground. I climbed out, looked up, found dirt on several steps leading upward. I took the fire-escape all the way to the flat roof of the five story building.

The footprints faded at the rooftop. I shined my light around the dark roof. On that black, moonless night, with clouds so low, a warm fog shrouded the roof. The air felt like a wet rag on my face. Littered with broken beer bottles and empty wine bottles, the roof had three rusty air-conditioning units. Moving carefully, I walked over to the AC units and peeked between the first two. Nothing. Focusing the Kel-lite between the second and third unit, I jumped back from the face staring at me.

“Jesus!” I unsnapped my holster and grabbed my magnum but didn’t pull it out. It didn’t take a genius to see she was dead. I re-snapped my holster and inched closer, training the light on a face limp and pasty with the unmistakable dull look of death. The eyes, half open, were as lifeless as marbles. She was a middle-aged woman with light brown hair and a thin build. She also wore red gym shorts with a gray tee-shirt, twisted around as if she’d been dragged.

“I don’t fuckin’ believe this.” In the moments it took to realize the head was all wrong, I felt something, as if those dead eyes locked on to mine. I stared back but it was nothing, couldn’t have been anything, but I felt my heart going boom, boom, boom. I sucked in a deep breath and looked closer at her neck. Twisted around, it had been snapped like a thin branch. A trace of blood trickled from her mouth. I reached over and placed two fingers against her throat. She was still warm, but there was no pulse, not that I expected any. Had to be sure. When I pulled my hand away, I felt something sharp. Looking closer, I discovered part of a thin gold chain embedded in her throat. Broken, the chain was only a few inches long.

“I don’t fuckin’ believe this!”

It took me about a minute to make it down to the window on the second floor window. It was open too, so I climbed in and raced down the hall to the stairs and down to my unit, pausing a few seconds to catch my breath.

“604, Headquarters.”

“Go ahead, 604.”

Keeping my voice as calm as I could, I said, “I need back-up.”

Headquarters acknowledged and put out the call. Two Sixth District units responded, then I cut in again. "604, Headquarters. I need a homicide unit. This is a Signal 30."

"10-4."

Then I told the operator I'd be back at Room 313 apprehending the perpetrator. I quickly described the big man with the red shorts and slammed the car door on the rising voices on the radio before the rank could tell me to stand by for back up. The fuck if I was gonna wait. I raced back into the building.

Taking the steps two at a time I made it to the third floor in less than a minute. Keeping my breathing level, I moved down the hall. I slipped my Kel-lite into its ring on my gunbelt, reached into my back pocket and pulled out my ID folder. I dug out a Miranda Warning card and put my ID folder back. Holding the card in my left hand, I unsnapped my holster and wrapped my fingers around the rubber grip of my four-inch, stainless-steel, Smith and Wesson .357 magnum.

Stopping just short of Room 313, I reached forward and knocked on the door. I could feel my heart pounding.

"What is it?"

"Police! Open the door."

The door shot open, and the man glared at me.

"I need your name," I said as calmly as I could. "For my report."

"What?"

"What's your name?" I stared back at the narrow eyes, keeping my face as expressionless as I could.

"What's this about?" The man stepped into the doorway.

I retreated a step, keeping a safe distance, turning my left shoulder to him, ready to pull my weapon.

"I have to read you your rights. You got a pen?"

"What?" A confused look came to his face.

"I have one," I said. "So just shut up, and I'll read you your rights."

He became even more confused. I read him his rights, quickly, keeping a wary eye on the hulking man.

"Now, you're gonna have to sign the back of this card."

"What?" The man's hands curled into fists.

I pulled my ball-point pen from my shirt pocket with my left hand, holding it out with the Miranda card for him.

"Just sign the back of the card."

The man looked at the card and then back at me.

"Take it!"

He reached for it, and I shoved the card and pen into his hand. “Now, sign it!”

He glared at me as if I was the mental case, then slowly turned and pressed the card against the door jam and signed it. He handed it back to me.

“Keep the fuckin’ pen,” I told him as I glanced at the rear of the card. “Is that a W?”

“Huh?”

“Woodie?”

He nodded slowly.

“Is that a V? Vitter?”

“Yeah,” he growled.

“You need to work on your fuckin’ penmanship, man. And you printed your name. Sign it.” I handed the card back.

He was so stunned he shook his head twice, “You nuts?” He left a body up on the roof and called me nuts. His eyes narrowed as he looked down the hall and said, “You’re alone, ain’t you?”

“The cavalry’s right behind.” I gave him a cold smile. “Now, just sign it.”

He snatched the card out of my hand and signed it and threw it and my pen back at me. They flew past my head, and I left them there. We stared at each other. I felt sweat working its way down my back. His face slowly contorted into a red rage and I slowly withdrew my magnum. He leaned toward me, his hands on either side of the door now.

“Well,” I said.

“Well, what?”

“You wanna fuckin’ tell me what happened?”

He looked down the hall again and said, “You’re kinda short, for a fuckin’ cop.”

“What are you, six-five, six-six?”

“Six-five,” he snarled. “You think you can stop me if I wanna get out of here?”

I gave him the Sicilian stare, looking right through his head all the way to the back of his skull, my face dead-pan serious. He wavered a second as if he was about to bolt. I raised the magnum quickly, cocking it in one smooth motion, pointing it at the big man’s chest.

“You’ll never clear the door,” I told him.

“You gonna shoot me? I’m unarmed.”

“Move one muscle and I’ll put six in you so fast, you’ll be dead before you hit the floor.”

He blinked.

“And I’ll get away with it. You’re too fuckin’ big. You’d overpower me. I had to shoot. I can see the headline now — Cop Shoots Killer.”

Woodie Vitter looked like a blue-gum street dog caught in an alley, head twisting from side to side. Perspiration ran down my temples, and I reminded myself of the old Sicilian saying, “Ice

in the veins. Ice in the veins.” I calmed myself as I held my cocked magnum in my unwavering hands.

Long, heart-thundering seconds crawled by.

He kept staring at me, looking meaner by the second.

“So,” I said. “Who was she?”

“Who?”

“On the roof.”

And there it was, in his eyes, the recognition. He looked up and then back at me, his brow furrowed. He slumped back slowly, his chest sinking, and I knew it was over. A distant look came to his eyes as he stared up at the ceiling again.

“How? How didja’ know?”

Footsteps behind me told me the cavalry had arrived.

“You wrung her neck and dragged her up on the roof. Figured you’d dump her later, right?”

Slowly, almost imperceptibly, he nodded.

Hurried footsteps arrived behind me. The first officer slid up, and I asked him to cuff the big bastard. As he did, I uncocked my magnum and re-holstered it. Then I wiped the sweat from my face.

The first homicide detective to arrive was Sergeant Rob Mason. Sporting his ever-present Marine Corps flat-top, Mason seemed stunned as I told him the story. He turned and looked at the dirt trail and then grabbed a patrolman and told him to make sure no one walked over it. Turning back to me, Mason pointed up and said, “The roof?”

“The roof. And he ate part of the gold chain around her neck.”

“Huh?”

I told him about the broken chain around her neck and how Woodie Vitter swallowed the other half. Mason shook his head and looked over his shoulder at Vitter standing in the debris of Room 313.

“That’s good work,” Mason said.

“He confessed too.” I reached down and picked up the Miranda card and tapped Mason’s shoulder. “I read him his rights first and had him sign it. He didn’t actually say he did it, but when I mentioned the roof he asked me how I found her. When I told him how he strangled her and dragged her up there, he nodded.”

“That’ll work in court,” Mason said as he looked at the card.

I turned it over to show him the signature.

Mason started to chuckle. “Where’d you learn to do that?”

“You taught us. At the Academy. Remember?”

Mason blinked at me in surprise, a hint of a smile on the corners of his mouth. “Yeah, but no one’s ever done it.”

I almost said — there's always a first time.

“OK.” Mason nodded. “Show me the body.”

I led the way. Climbing back into the window after we'd checked out the body, Mason told me to go wait next to the window. I knew that the rest of my shift would be nothing but paperwork.

Leaning against the only clean-looking spot on the wall, I looked out the window at the night. The clouds were parting, and distant stars blinked faintly in the black sky. For a moment I wondered what she'd felt. What terror she went through in those last seconds. I'd felt a connection with the woman on the roof when those eyes locked on to mine. Something had passed between us, as if she had told me to go get him. No, it was my eyes that locked, my heart thumping. She was fuckin' dead.

Standing near the window, I felt the link again, that connection, causing my heartbeat to rise as a whispery voice told me, in so many words, that I had to catch who did this. I've felt that link many times since with many victims, stronger after I became a homicide detective. That night on Tchoupitoulas Street was the first time.

My thoughts of a connection drifted away on the hot breeze blowing through the window, taking with it any satisfaction I could possibly have catching her killer because I had said it. I had cruised down the street, thinking how quiet it was, and then said it. A sourness came to my stomach as the old saying echoed in my mind — “Don't ever say it's too quiet. If you do, someone's bound to get killed.”

I told myself, that wasn't it. I told myself it's the nature of the beast, living in the great southern murder capital of America. People fuckin' kill each other.

But...just don't ever say it's too quiet.

Trust me on this.

END

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by O'Neil De Noux

THE ANNIVERSARY

by

Anita Page

*Anita Page's story "Twas the Night" which appeared in **The Gift of Murder** (Wolfmont Press), won a Derringer award this year from the Short Mystery Fiction Society. Other stories have appeared in **The Prosecution Rests** (Little, Brown), **Murder New York Style** (L & L Dreamspell), **Word Riot**, **Mysterical-e**, **Mouth Full of Bullets**, **Ball State University Forum**, **Jewish Horizons** and **Heresies**. She worked as a freelance journalist in the Catskills, where much of her fiction takes place. She now lives in New York's Hudson Valley.*

Winter had come early, as it usually did in the Catskills, the trees bare after two days of heavy rain. The dog was at my elbow, waiting for his hunk of bagel; my wife was out running despite—to spite, she said—the weather. Even if she'd been at the table buttering her toast, I would have kept Monty's email to myself. *Thirty years, buddy. See you tonight. I'm buying.* If I mentioned it, Olivia would bring up retirement, and I would say: Not yet. And she would say: When? And for that I had no answer. Once I handed in my shield and gun, what was there to do but wait to die?

Thirty years on the job. Thirty years since I'd lost my best friend.

I drank my coffee and glanced at the headlines, distracted by memories of that first day. I'd gotten to town almost an hour early, the November sky low and dark, much as today. I parked in the supermarket lot down from the station house and waited. Be cool, Dave had warned me. No one likes a hotshot. I turned on the radio and fiddled with the dial, then turned it off. The hour dragged and then sped up, as though time was following an erratic principle that had nothing to do with the movement of the planet.

When I finally got out of the car and crossed the street, I caught a glimpse of my reflection in the plate glass window of the drugstore, and my chest tightened. I saw my dad, in uniform, waiting to walk me to work, as he had walked me to school all those years I was growing up. *Listen to the teacher, Rich.* I could hear him say the words.

My mother blamed my dad's early death—a heart attack at forty-eight—on the job, and was furious at Dave Weslowski, who she'd always considered a bad influence, for persuading me to quit college after two years. Dave had gone to the academy straight from high school and had

been working for more than a year when he heard about an opening in the department and pushed me to apply. His fantasies about him and me working together made small town policing sound like a Hollywood buddy movie. As a cop's kid, I knew better. But I also knew law school was my mother's dream, not mine.

The squad room was a dismal place in those days, back before the new addition went up. Metal desks jammed together, stacks of files on every surface, dingy green walls. I got greetings and thumbs up as I made my way through to Chief Buckley's office at the far end. Dave wasn't around, which surprised me, but I was more concerned with not saying or doing something profoundly stupid.

The chief indicated that I should sit, which I did, keeping to the edge of the chair. Despite the draft coming from the window in that small office—a window kept open, I was to learn, through the depths of the Catskill winter—I sweated while he made his speech about my dad, and how I'd make the department proud if I turned out to be half the cop Richard Cleary Sr. was. Then he announced that Sgt. DeWitt would be my FTO—field training officer—for the next few weeks, and I stifled a groan. Monty DeWitt was the one cop in town with whom I had a history. He was in his early forties, which in my twenty-one year old mind meant he was an old man. Not much chin, prominent nose, rarely smiled. I can see him now, striding across the Mastersons' cow pasture to bust up our underage beer party, shining his flashlight in our faces and lingering on mine a second longer than the rest, reciting our names to let us know he knew who we were.

Years later, Monty kidded me about the incident, but that first morning he kept it to himself as he gave me his Policing 101 lecture, beginning with: Keep your eyes open and your mouth shut. That's what we were up to when the call came in.

Paul Sherman took it, saying loud enough so we heard him across the room, "No, he's not back yet." Then, "Yeah, I guess it was a busy night," which drew snickers. It didn't take a genius to figure out that some cop's wife was under the delusion her husband was working overtime. Then he said, "I'll give him the message when he gets in, Lisa," and my anger came on hard and fast, like a wave that slams you to the ground.

Lisa McAndrew was the closest I'd ever had to a sister. She lived down the road from us and when we were kids I spent as much time in her house as I did in my own. When she and Dave started dating in our senior year, I told him if he ever hurt her—and he'd left a trail of tearful girls in the halls of our high school—I'd mess up his face so bad no woman would ever look at him again. Dave had laughed and said I had nothing to worry about. This was the real thing. He was in love.

That morning, I tried to concentrate on what Monty was saying, but my mind was on Dave, and how, since he'd broken his promise, I was going to have to keep mine.

It was then the woman turned up, hysterical and in nothing but her underwear, screaming at the desk sergeant about her husband threatening to shoot her boyfriend and her crawling out the bathroom window. Monty put his jacket around her, and was trying to calm her down enough so we could get the story, when someone said, "Holy crap. That's Dave Weslowski's girlfriend."

We were out of there in seconds, sirens screaming, heading north. The woman, Julie Jackson, was in the back of the chief's car, directing us on the unmarked mountain roads. Monty and I followed. He was driving but my foot was pressed to the floor. When we hit a pothole, I lurched, slamming my head against the side window, but it barely registered. I felt nothing but dread.

The Jacksons' brick ranch was on a cleared half-acre seven miles from town. Dave's car was parked in back, under the deck. We found him sprawled across the queen-size bed, naked except for his socks. His eyes were open and he was a bloody mess. I made it outside before I puked, then cleaned myself up as best I could at the spigot near the kitchen door. When I went back inside, Paul was questioning Mrs. Jackson in the kitchen, taking down names of her husband's contacts. The bedroom door was shut, and the small living room was crowded with cops. I don't know how these men felt about Dave when he was alive, but the pain of his death was written on every face.

The chief asked if I was up to breaking the news to Lisa, and I said I was fine with it. That was a lie, but I couldn't bear the thought of someone else telling her. Monty went with me, but we agreed I'd do the talking.

She came to the door in sweats, brown hair pulled back. If I was selling something, I would have asked to see her mother. At the sight of us, she aged. She knew the news was awful, as any cop's wife would, seeing two of his colleagues at the door in the middle of the day. She had no idea how awful until I got her inside and, gripping her hands, told her how Dave had died.

She was a quiet crier, I remembered that from when her dog died. But when I came at her with that second punch, sounds ripped from her throat that I'd never heard before, and I half-expected blood to spill from her mouth. I tried to hold onto her, but she shoved me away, screaming, "I'm *pregnant*. Did the son of a bitch tell you that?"

He hadn't. She must have seen that on my face, because she grabbed me and started crying into my chest.

Monty found their address book on the kitchen counter and called Lisa's sister and her mother. We sat with her until they arrived, rushing through the door in tears. I told Lisa I would stop by as soon as I could, but she seemed not to hear me.

* * * * *

Julie Jackson's husband had close to a thousand dollars wrapped in aluminum foil in the freezer. This was not information she'd thought to share with us; we found the packet when we went through the house after Mrs. Jackson was taken to stay with a friend in town. She did tell us her husband had grabbed Dave's gun from the nightstand, which meant that if Jackson was desperate for cash, there was a chance he'd come back armed.

By that time, I imagined, every cop in the state but me was searching for Dave's killer. I was the one-man stakeout, stuck looking at the four walls of the Jackson living room, hoping I didn't shoot off my foot, or worse, if and when Jackson came for his money.

I remember every detail of that room, from the stain on the gray carpet to the magazines on the coffee table. Mostly, I watched the light through the opening in the pale blue drapes, willing the afternoon to pass. Memories came at me like an assault. Try to touch them and they go through your fingers like air. Camping out in Dave's backyard every summer of elementary school. Rolling my dad's car out of the driveway after midnight, sneaking back in before dawn.

Paul's words kept coming back at me. *Weslowski's girlfriend*. What bar had he been hanging out with her in? And how could he have done this to Lisa, to himself, to me?

At one point, Dave's voice and laugh were so clear I couldn't believe he wasn't in the room. I forced myself to go to the bedroom, where I stood beside the bed taking in the reality of those bloody sheets. That's when the tears finally came.

When darkness fell, it was total, the way it is in the country on a moonless night: no houses within view, no lampposts, too far from town to pick up even a distant glow. The rumble of the furnace and the intermittent hum of the fridge were the only sounds except for an occasional car. That's when I would freeze, waiting for the crunch of wheels on gravel, which never came. I kept the silence, and the dark, as I'd been ordered: no TV, no radio, no flashlight, no flushing the john.

I'd been sitting in the dark for a couple of hours, when I began to feel lightheaded. Not a surprise, since I couldn't remember my last meal. I left my gun on the coffee table—dumb move number one—and went out to the kitchen, feeling my way though I had pretty good night vision.

Then came one of those situations when your brain says no, but your body doesn't get the message in time to stop. I'm referring to the refrigerator light. The second it registered, I slammed the fridge door shut, but the crash outside made it clear how badly I'd screwed up. I went for my gun and ran out the door. I saw the trash can he'd knocked over, but no sign of the

man. No sound of an engine either. I figured he'd pulled a car into the woods some distance from the house, but which direction?

I gambled and raced south, listening for his pounding feet, but either I'd guessed wrong or he'd ducked off the road and was making his way through the woods to his car. When I did hear an engine a distance away, I picked up speed, the cold searing my lungs and my heart slamming into my chest so hard, I thought: This was it; I was going to go the way my dad had gone. Then I had my first piece of luck: A fuel truck, high beams on, approached from the north just as Jackson pulled his pickup out of the woods. I was too far away to get the number, but I did see the gold on blue that told me those were probably old Pennsylvania plates.

Dave's car was still under the deck behind the house, and I had the keys. I wanted to go after Jackson so bad I could taste it, but I had my orders. If the situation arose, I was to call it in. The chief didn't want a rookie with less than a day on the job giving high-speed chase.

* * * * *

I admit I thought about keeping the fridge light to myself, but I didn't.

Chief Buckley, sounding more tired than mad: "That was pretty damn stupid."

"Yes, sir."

"I expect you'll remember that refrigerator light for the rest of your career, brief as it may be."

"Yes, sir."

"Good."

My one redeeming act was catching the out-of-state plate. Julie Jackson had given us names of her husband's connections all over the county, as well as down in Jersey, but not until Paul Sherman turned up that night at her friend's house did Mrs. Jackson recall that, oh yes, her husband had a cousin who lived in eastern Pennsylvania to whom he might have gone for help.

We were more than a half hour from the state line, double that to the small town where Jackson's cousin lived. Every police force in that area was now searching for Jackson, so it was unlikely that Monty and I, even flooring it on those back country roads, were going to be in on the capture, but we could hope. We were approaching the bridge that would take us into Pennsylvania, when the radio squawked and I was sure we were being called back. But it turned out the party wasn't over. Jackson's cousin claimed he hadn't seen him in more than a year.

Monty's comment: "Why am I not surprised."

"You think his wife got word to him?"

"*Think?*" Monty said. Then, as the bridge rumbled beneath us, "For a smart guy, your pal Dave..." He glanced at me and let it go. "Ah, shit. What a goddamn waste."

He got no argument from me.

* * * * *

Some sheriff's deputies found him. They'd been cruising the area and spotted tire tracks leading to a derelict barn off a secondary road thirty miles from Jackson's cousin's place. We got there soon after first light. Mist was rising from a field gleaming with frost and dotted with the stubble of last year's corn. A sheriff's car was half-pulled off the road, and three deputies, two of them smoking, stood beside a green barn that looked close to collapsing in on itself.

"Got your boy," one of the deputies said as we approached. He was a big man, closer to Monty's age than mine. "Looks like the cop killer was overcome by remorse."

"Where?" Monty asked, and the deputy nodded in the direction of the barn.

The place was a garbage dump: stacks of old tires, rusted farm equipment, rotted lumber. Black walnuts had been piled in a corner, probably by squirrels. Part of the roof was missing, but the rafters were intact. Jackson was hanging from one of them. With his blue face and protruding tongue, he barely resembled the picture his wife had given us. The stink from his waste mixed with the smells of mice and rot and the sharp tang of walnuts.

Monty asked, "You okay?"

I nodded, trying to make sense of the low milking stool lying beneath the body swinging from a rafter maybe thirty feet high. The picture was as convincing as a prop in a school play. It would take an extension ladder to get a rope over that rafter, like the aluminum one they'd left in plain sight beside the barn, too arrogant to bother covering their tracks.

When we got back outside, the men went silent. One of the deputies, a young guy with a pale face, was grinning, like a kid who thought he was going to get a gold star.

The smart thing would have been to shut up, but I was too angry to be smart. First Dave screwing around, throwing away his own life and tearing up Lisa's; now these cowboys who called themselves cops. I realized later how much those feelings had to do with my dad, but at the time, I thought only about punching the smile off that dumb bastard's moon face.

"I don't get it," I said, with enough edge in my voice to let them know I did. "The guy had a gun. He wanted to off himself, why didn't he use it?"

My words sent a charge rippling through the cold morning air, and I thought of every facedown in every Western I'd ever seen. One of the men, a runt of a guy, ground his cigarette into the dirt and gave me an ugly smile. "No accounting for taste," he said, and the moon-faced kid laughed.

Before I had a chance to open my mouth again, Monty clapped me on the shoulder, his thumb digging into bone. "Wait in the car," he said, and when I didn't jump to obey, he dug in another quarter inch.

* * * * *

We didn't talk for the first part of the ride home. I stared out the window at rolling hills, a gentler landscape than I was used to. Dave's killer was dead and my insides felt as if they'd been gutted. Monty took the turns at seventy, never glancing my way. I don't know which of us was more pissed off.

After we crossed back over the Delaware, he said, each word laced with fury, "Were you trying to get us killed? Was that the point back there?"

I shot back: "You're telling me what they did was okay?"

"Did I say that?" he bellowed in the voice that had scared the pants off us that night in the Mastersons' field.

That was the end of the discussion, which was fine because there was nothing more to talk about.

A while later, out of nowhere, he said, "Why don't you wait a month before you decide for sure, Rich."

Either he was a genuine psychic, or my decision to have the shortest career in the history of the department was plastered on my face.

"What's the point?" I said.

By way of answer, he launched into a story about a call he and his partner had taken years before involving gunshots at one of the abandoned bungalow colonies that dot the county. "We get there," he said, "we bang on the door, we call out. Nothing. Then we kick open the door, which didn't take much, and the guy's sitting on the edge of a chair, gun on his lap, three babies

dead on the bed. His wife had died of pneumonia, so he had to quit his job because he had no one to take care of the kids, and then the money ran out so he couldn't feed them. He pleaded with us to let him bury them out back before we took him in because he couldn't pay for a funeral."

"He could have gone on welfare," I said. Smart ass kid, twenty-one, with all the answers.

"They were illegals. No green card."

"And you're telling me this why? Like this is what I have to look forward to?"

A roadside café was ahead on the right. Monty signaled and pulled onto the gravel before he answered. "My worst day in nineteen years on the job, seeing that poor son of a bitch crying with his dead babies laying across the bed. Today you've had your worst day. No matter how many years you put in, nothing's going to top it."

"Like you can read the future," I said.

"Ah, hell, Richie," he said, giving me one of those long looks I would come to know well. "The future's easy. It's the past you've got to live with."

* * * * *

My wife's steps sounded on the porch, the dog's cue to trot out of the room with the bagel in his mouth. I carried my cup to the sink. I'd pick Monty up later—he's long retired, of course—and we'd go to the local roadhouse for a few beers, a tradition we established years ago. We'd drink to Dave's memory and tell old stories, not all of them sad. I'm not sure what I'll do when he's gone.

END

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by Anita Page

WAITING GRAVES

by

Mark Joseph Kiewlak

*In the past two years Mark Joseph Kiewlak's fiction has appeared in more than thirty magazines, including **Hardboiled**, **Plots With Guns**, **A Twist of Noir**, **Thuglit**, **The Bitter Oleander**, **CrimeSpree**, and many others. His story, "The Present," was nominated for the 2010 SpineTingler Award: Best Short Story on the Web. He has also written for DC Comics (**The Flash**).*

It was late in the day. I didn't get there when I should've. It was raining. No one seemed to mind.

I made my way among the gravestones and found the right one and knelt down. I didn't know any prayers.

The stone was smaller than I remembered and with each passing year it sank a bit deeper into the earth. When I lifted my head I saw a little girl, no more than six or seven, peeking out at me from behind a nearby tree trunk. Her raven hair was plastered to her forehead and hanging down in her eyes and she ducked back when she saw me looking at her. I got up and made my way over to her.

She was sitting in the wet grass with her back against the trunk. She was wearing a pretty cotton dress, like something for Easter. She was soaked through. She was crying.

"The man is hurting my mommy," she said.

I bent down in a crouch, trying to make eye contact, but still keeping my distance.

"What man?" I said. "Can you take me to him?"

She raised one thin arm and pointed toward the woods. Her head was still turned away from me.

"He's there," she said.

She held her arm up longer than was necessary then lowered it and scrunched herself up into a ball against the tree trunk.

"You have to show me," I said. "I need your help."

She shook her head. Still no eye contact.

"I can stop the man," I said. "I can help your mommy. But you have to help me."

She shook her head again, more violently.

"I can't leave you here alone," I said. "You have to come with me. I won't hurt you. And I won't let anybody else hurt you."

She was still for a moment. The rain was a mist now, all around us. The gray was fading to black.

"It's dark," she said. "It's getting dark."

"I know it is," I said. "But you have to be brave. You have to help me."

"That's what my mommy said. She said I have to be brave. She told me to run away as fast as I could. She told me not to come back."

"She was trying to protect you," I said. "That's what mommies do. But sometimes they need protecting. Sometimes they need your help."

She lifted her head slowly and got to her feet. There was mud caked on her pretty shoes and the bow in her hair was coming undone.

"I'll show you where she is," the girl said.

She began walking in front of me, pushing her tiny feet through the wet heavy grass, navigating a zigzag pattern between the tombstones. She never looked back at me, only ahead at the woods. She began to walk faster, then to run. Several times she nearly stumbled upon the uneven ground. I could've moved much faster carrying her but I could tell she didn't want to be touched. I'd seen that reaction before. Too many times.

We reached the edge of the woods and she hesitated. It was foggy and dark now and I had no coat to put over her shivering shoulders.

"I'm not sure which way," she said. "I don't remember."

Before I could answer she stepped forward into the high weeds and pushed on straight ahead, detouring around the denser patches and the tree trunks interspersed here or there. There was no path to follow.

After a minute or two, as we circled back closer to the road, we came upon the scene of an accident.

The car had crashed down an embankment and been stopped by a tree, around which the front end was wrapped like some hideous metal pincer claw. The woman in the passenger side had gone through the windshield and was stopped halfway, her torso splayed across the hood, her cheek resting against the cold metal, turned toward us, eyes open and alert.

"Mommy!" the girl said, and started to run down the embankment.

There was another girl, a teenager, peeking out from the back seat. Her door was dented in a way such that it wouldn't open.

And circling the car, waving a gun, his T-shirt hanging out, was a kid in his late-twenties, drunk, covered with blood, and angry. He pointed the gun at the woman hanging halfway through the windshield and wiped spit from the corner of his mouth. "I said get up, you bitch," he said.

The little girl who had brought me here tumbled halfway down the hill and I caught up to her. The kid with the gun noticed us now and circled toward us and pointed the gun at us.

"Lizzie," he said. "Get away from that man and come down here."

He was wobbly drunk, but the trigger on his gun wouldn't know the difference. I thought about my own gun, back in the glove compartment of my car.

"Put the gun down," I said.

"Who the fuck are you?" the kid said. "Get the fuck out of here."

The girl struggled against my grip on her arm. She wasn't looking at the kid, but past him at the people in the car. "I want my mommy," she said.

"Let go of Lizzie," the kid said, "or I'll blow your fucking head off."

I was still maybe thirty feet away. I had no trees for cover, so there was no way I could rush him.

"Johnny, don't," a voice said. It was the woman stuck through the windshield. Her voice sounded perfectly normal despite her circumstances.

"Shut the fuck up, bitch," Johnny said. "I told you to crawl on out of there."

"Mommy!" the little girl said.

Johnny kept his gun on me. I tucked the girl behind my leg and moved slowly toward the scene. "Stay behind me, princess," I said. "I'll take you to your mommy."

"The hell you will," Johnny said. He took a step forward to block the way. A noise behind him made him turn. It was the teenaged girl cowering in the back seat. She was trying to get the door open despite the dent. She couldn't.

"Stay where you fuckin' are," Johnny said. "I'll handle this."

The teenaged girl shrunk back and all but disappeared. Only her eyes and the top of her head were visible above the windowsill.

"Try to take what's mine," Johnny said, "I'll kill you."

I was close enough now so that he might actually hit me if he fired.

"What's yours, Johnny?" I said.

"They're all mine," he said. "All three."

I was starting to get the picture.

"No one's arguing that," I said. "But they need help. Look behind you. They need you to get them help."

Johnny spun and pointed the gun at the woman on the hood. Her eyes went wide. "Her?" he said. "She's fine. Come on out of there, bitch. I said you're fine."

When she couldn't comply, Johnny fired the gun at her. I was maybe two steps too far back to lunge at him. The bullet whanged off the hood a few inches from her face and Johnny spun back around before I could make another move. The little girl tried to break my grip but I held her behind me. I was afraid I would break her wrist if this went on much longer.

The woman on the hood began to cry softly. After the echo of the shot died away her voice was the only sound in the dark woods around us. "Johnny, please," she said. "Let Lizzie go. Just let her go. Please."

He spoke without turning. "Lizzie?" he said. "What about Sammy? I can have Sammy now? Now I can have her? Is that what you're sayin'? I have your fucking permission now to have her?"

The woman cried and couldn't wipe her tears. Her left arm was pinned beneath her, the elbow bent at an odd angle. I couldn't see what had happened to her right arm.

"Is that what you're sayin'?" Johnny went on, enjoying his sadism. "That I can have your daughter, your precious little girl, Sammy?"

The woman choked once on her sobs and squeezed her eyes shut. "Yes," she said. "You can have Sammy. But please leave Lizzie alone."

Johnny grinned and I saw that two of his front teeth had been knocked out. "Well how about that?" he said. "I can have Sammy. Finally. Finally I get Mommy's permission. Well guess what, you dumb bitch. I've been having Sammy for years. I have her every night. And I know you know it too. I think what I'm gonna do is pull you on out of there and have me a threesome!"

I picked up the little girl Lizzie and threw her as far as I could toward the trees to my left. I went in low at Johnny and took him at the waist before he could get a second shot off. His first shot whizzed past my ear into the hard earth behind me. I slapped the gun away and pummeled his face as I pinned him on the ground near the car. He wasn't struggling. He wasn't even conscious. But I kept hitting him and I knew why. I'd never known what happened to them. He was the next best thing. Someone to blame.

I felt a sharp pain in my shoulder and a second later I heard the shot. It was the girl from the backseat. She must have crawled out the other side when no one was looking. I fell forward against the side of the car and turned so that I was sitting with my back up against it. The girl was five feet away, holding Johnny's gun on me. She wasn't cowering anymore.

"You leave him alone," she said. "I don't want you to hurt him."

The little girl, Lizzie, had picked herself up from where I'd thrown her and was charging back toward the scene. She ran straight up to the other girl and clamped onto her leg. "Don't shoot the nice man," she said. "He helped me."

The other girl was trying to ignore her and concentrate on me.

"He helped me," Lizzie said, "please don't shoot him. Please don't hurt him, Mommy."

The teenaged girl softened a bit and began to waver. I was bleeding but not too badly. So far.

"He's going to take Daddy away from us," the teenaged girl said. "I can't let him. I need Daddy. We need Daddy. To love us."

I glanced at Johnny. He wasn't moving. I reached out and tapped his side with my foot. Nothing. I started to climb to my feet.

"Where are you going?" the girl said.

"To get help," I said. "And I'm taking the two of you with me."

"Stay back," the girl said. "I'll shoot you again."

"Mommy, no!"

I saw in her eyes that she was used up. Barely seventeen, yet she had nothing left inside her except what he had put there. A sickening dependence. And a weakness she thought was love.

"Samantha," a voice said, "come over here. Come over here right now." It was the woman on the hood. Still calm. Stern.

Samantha stood frozen, torn in many directions. Her long hair was in her eyes.

"Samantha," the woman said again.

Samantha began to back away, with Lizzie in tow. I stayed where I was, leaning on the roof of the crumpled car. I turned slightly, so that I was facing the injured woman. Her hair was a bloody mop matted to her forehead. Her insides were running down the jagged glass that had cut her almost in two. I saw now that her right arm was partially severed, hanging loosely over the side near the right front tire. She was still coherent.

"What is it, Momma?" Samantha said, as she stood at the front of the car with the tree trunk between them.

"You have to go with the man," the woman said. "He'll take you away from here. You can't do anything else now. It's over."

"But Johnny..."

"It's over," the woman said again. "Johnny was no good for us. That's why I turned the wheel. He's no good for you. And now Lizzie will be safe. Johnny's no good."

With her daughter clawing at her leg and her mother crying softly, the girl Samantha laid her gun down on the hood of the car. She lifted Lizzie into her arms.

"It's over now," the woman said. "Go with the man. Get out of here. Hurry, Samantha. I'm going to die and I don't want you here to see it."

"You're not going to die, Momma. You can't die."

I pushed off the roof and walked slowly toward the girl. I took her under the arm and gave a gentle tug and started her moving in my direction. Lizzie was hung around her neck, looking over her shoulder, as we moved away. I saw Johnny begin to stir and then I saw Samantha's mother struggling, shifting her torso, what was left of it, as tears began to fill her eyes. She somehow wrenched her left arm from beneath her and began to inch her fingers across the hood to where Samantha had laid down the gun. We were up into the woods now, disappearing out of sight. Samantha was emotionless, in shock, pushing one foot before the other, while Lizzie, safe in her mother's arms, was beginning to fall asleep. I was bleeding and going numb and thinking about the gravestone and the shining eyes that would never smile upon me again. The shot came and Samantha flinched, but kept going. When the second shot came she paused a moment and stared at nothing. I let go of her arm and stood beside her, waiting. Lizzie stirred a bit, and Samantha patted her back and started walking again.

"No one will love me now," she said.

END

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by Mark Joseph Kiewlak

BAD DAY IN THE BADLANDS

a Joe Hannibal story

by

Wayne D. Dundee

*Wayne D. Dundee has six novels, three novellas, and over twenty short stories to his credit. All of the novels and most of the shorts have featured his PI protagonist Joe Hannibal, formerly operating out of northwest Illinois but now relocated (along with Dundee) to west central Nebraska. His work has been translated into several different languages and has been nominated (in various categories) for an Edgar, an Anthony, and six Shamus Awards. No winners, however, which makes him sort of the Susan Lucci of mystery fiction. In the mid-eighties he was the founder and original editor of **Hardboiled Magazine**.*

The beating was already under way when Abby and I pulled up.

It was a Thursday in early May, about nine-thirty in the morning. The air was still and warm and carried a faint haziness that hinted at the possibility of rain later on. We had left at daybreak for the 150-mile drive to this remote corner of the panhandle, a little-visited place known these days as Toadstool Park but in the past commonly referred to simply as "the Toadstools" or "Nebraska's badlands". Our purpose in coming here was to simply spend a day together. Do some hiking and exploring and then, after enjoying a leisurely late lunch from the picnic basket Abby had packed, return home by evening.

That was the plan.

But spotting the guy beating the shit out of his wife immediately upon our arrival tended to nudge things off course in a hurry.

To get to Toadstool Park you must traverse the last twenty or so miles via a "minimum maintenance" road—which is to say a narrow, unpaved track of gravel and sand, deeply rutted in places, crowded on either side by vehicle-scraping brush and thick high plains grasses. Once you reach the park itself, nowadays under the auspices of the Nebraska Game & Parks Division, there is a short entrance/exit circle (also gravel, but smoothly graded and better maintained – go figure) with parking to access the walking trails that are the only way to enter the actual badlands. Around the outer rim of the circle are also a half dozen camping sites complete with fire pits and picnic tables, a handful of additional picnic tables for day visitors, a pair of outhouses, an old-fashioned hand pump for fresh water, and a replica sod house off to one side showing how pioneers who first settled in the area had to build their homes due to the scarcity of

trees and lumber. In the center of the circle are display placards detailing the features and geological history of the place.

Most of this was just the prelim, of course, the gateway to the main event—the badlands themselves, stretching out ahead as far as the eye could see. A splatter of barren whitish-gray rock, solidified lava spewed millions of years ago from thousands of miles away when the earth was still boiling and bubbling in its infancy. Then cooled for thousands of more years under an inland ocean until the buckling, shifting land masses that slammed up the Rocky Mountain and the Continental Divide off to the west caused the lake to drain away in a series of raging rivers that started to sculpt the silt and sandstone-over-lava deposits until they were scoured dry and standing slightly elevated above the surrounding grasslands. After that the wind and rain and other elements took over and continue to this day eroding the twisting gullies and mounds and towers (several of the latter taking on the distinct mushroom or toadstool shapes for which the park is named) until the whole works looks collectively like a slice of moonscape plunked down out here on the edge of the high plains.

But now, having made it here ourselves, standing between Abby and me and our intended exploration of this moonscape, was the disturbing tableau of some shirtless, bristly-haired asshole of a guy slapping around a skinny woman wearing shorts and a halter top and one flip-flop sandal.

They were positioned outside a decade-old green pickup with a silver camper shell parked at one of the camp sites. It was evident they had stayed overnight. For whatever reason, this morning was not finding them in blissful harmony. Far from it. The guy was standing over the woman with his feet planted wide, fists balled. She was sprawled on the ground before him, propped up on one elbow and one hip. Her left eye was swollen and bruised and a string of blood ran from the corner of her mouth.

As we'd rolled slowly onto the park grounds, Abby and I had put down our windows to enjoy the fresh smell of the grasses and wild flowers. Our first order of business was to have been a pit stop at the park's outhouses (the remains of wake-up coffee to be dealt with, you understand), which happened to be just beyond where the camper was parked. So as we drew closer to the feuding couple, who seemed oblivious to our approach, we could plainly hear them shouting at one another.

"Now, you worthless cunt," the guy was saying, "are you ready to get up off your lazy ass and make me some breakfast, or do you want to sass-mouth me some more and see what comes next?"

"Fuck you, Eddie. Fuck you to hell! Why should I do anything you want when all you ever do is knock me around?"

"Because if you *don't* do what I want, you stupid bitch, I'm gonna knock you around all the harder. Is that too complicated for your stupid bitch brain to comprehend?"

"Jesus," said Abby in the seat beside me. "This is about to get ugly."

"Not 'about to get'—already is," I corrected her.

"We're going to have to do something, Joe."

I heaved a sigh. "Yeah. Not much choice."

I cut the engine, shouldered open my door, and got out. Abby exited on the passenger side.

Abby, I guess I should explain, is Abby Bridger. She runs the No Name Bay General Store And Lodge at No Name Bay on Lake McConaughy in the west central part of the state. Since I am the permanent resident of lodge cabin number six, this makes her my landlady. Oh yeah, and we also have a pretty nifty romance thing going on between us.

Me, my name's Joe Hannibal. For a lot of years I operated as a PI back in Illinois. But then a series of upheavals in my life caused me to re-evaluate some things and I ended up transplanting myself to the cornhusker state. Having met Abby along the way factored more than a little bit into making that decision. So now I still carry a PI ticket (issued by my new state and applied for more or less out of habit) but I mostly keep busy running a private security patrol contracted to homes and businesses around Lake Mac and no longer actively solicit investigative work.

When the woman on the ground finally took notice of Abby and me, her eyes widened. The guy threatening her, following this shift in her gaze, turned to have a look for himself. He quickly made it clear he didn't like what he saw.

"There's a whole big ol' park around here with things to see and do," he said. "Be best if you folks found somewhere else in it to commence your seein' and doin'."

"That's disappointing," I replied. "Appeared you were having some kind of party over here, we thought maybe we'd be invited to join in."

He took my choice of words and used them to try and be cute. "What?," he said with a smarmy grin. "You lookin' to cuff around your old lady, too?"

I felt my chest tighten and the heat start to crawl up my throat. Holding my voice flat, I said, "If I was looking to cuff around anybody, I'm pretty sure my first choice would be you."

He had some size to him, as beefy as he was belligerent. The musculature across his bared torso looked like it had probably been solid and well defined about six or eight years ago, when he was maybe twenty. But it had all started to soften and blur. Too much greasy food and booze, I judged. The puffiness under his eyes added silent testimony to the booze part, most likely cheap beer. In another ten years he'd have man boobs and a gut hanging over his belt buckle like a sagging porch roof. But in the meantime he looked like he could still be a handful. For my part, I was no spring chicken anymore, was carrying around too much gut of my own, and had recently acquired a bum hip as the result of getting caught too near to a plastique explosive when it went off. Nevertheless, I make it a rule not to be intimidated by any slob who tries to show how tough he is by knocking around a woman.

"I'm going to do you a favor, old man," the slob said now, "and let that remark slide. One time." He held up a thick forefinger for emphasis. "If, that is, you turn your baggy old ass around and get the fuck out of here right now. Believe me, you do *not* want any part of this."

"You're right. I *don't* want any part of this," I allowed. "But we're sort of past the point of no return on that, aren't we? I'm here, you're here, and your woman is lying there on the ground with a bloody face ... no way I can just walk away and leave it be."

The battered woman quickly spoke up. "Never mind, mister. It's okay. You'll only make it worse. Please, just go away like he said."

"No, it's *not* okay," Abby said to her. "Don't you understand that he'll just keep doing this as long as you put up with it? And don't try to tell me this is the first time he's hit you. Come away with us—right now—and we'll take you some place where you can get... "

The guy—Eddie—took a sudden step toward us. "You ain't takin' her no damn where, bitch! The only thing you're gonna take is your old man there and hit the fuckin' road before I give the both of you a taste of the same thing she got!"

There was no sense dancing around the edges of it any longer. It was obvious what this was going to come down to.

"Okay, shit head," I said, moving toward Eddie and motioning him to meet me. "Let's see who gives who a taste of what."

With his size and temperament, I had him figured for a bull-rusher. Actually, I was *hoping* that's how he would go about it. If it turned out he knew how to box, say, or had any kind of martial arts training that gave him stick-and-move capability, I would be in for a much tougher time. I'd never been a float-like-a-butterfly-sting-like-a-bee type myself and now my accumulated years and stiff hip made me even less so. But I could write a book on in-fighting; with a special chapter devoted to *dirty* in-fighting. All I had to do was get my hands on Eddie-boy and...

He rushed me and all of a sudden I had my hands on two hundred and fifty hard-charging pounds of Eddie-boy. I braced and lunged to intercept the impact like a defensive lineman stuffing a pass rush. He skidded me back a few of steps but I stayed on my feet. Then, as soon as his momentum was slowed, before he could decide what to do next, I dropped into a slight crouch and scooped my right arm under his left, shoving it up and over. I locked onto the arm and twisted our bodies, at the same time slamming into him with my chest, taking him off balance, forcing him back and down, sending us both crashing to the ground with me on top. On impact a gush of air *whoofed* out of him and I simultaneously drove the point of my right elbow into his windpipe. He made a gagging, cat-trying-to-cough-up-a-hairball sound. I forearmed him hard across the jaw twice and then, while he was still gagging, I drove the elbow down again and smeared his nose all over his face like a gob of silly putty. Blood sprayed and bubbled from the flattened nostrils.

That quick, the fight was pretty much over. I'd gotten the breaks, gained the leverage. I was in control. I could have let up some at that point but I wanted to send a message. So I dropped both knees onto his stomach for good measure then got straddle of him, knees now pinning his shoulders to the ground, and began slapping him first on one side of his face and then the other.

Hard, cracking blows with the flat of my palms.

Slap, slap. Slap, slap.

"How do *you* like getting cuffed around, Eddie?"

Slap, slap. Slap, slap.

"Not so much fucking fun, is it?"

Slap, slap. Slap, slap.

"Who's the bitch now, Eddie? Who's getting a taste of what now?"

I'd had control, but then I lost it—lost control of myself. I became aware of Abby grabbing at my arm and shouting for me to stop. The woman with the bloody mouth was shouting for me to stop, too. Screaming for me to stop.

"Get off him, you bastard! Let him up, you're killing him! Stop it! Quit!"

I pushed off the fallen man, my breath coming in rapid bursts, my arms suddenly weighing a ton each. When I stood up Abby put her hands on my shoulder to help steady me. I backed away, looking down at my hands, streaked scarlet from repeatedly striking Eddie's blood-smeared face.

The skinny woman fell to her knees beside Eddie and gently slipped one hand under the back of his head, lifting it as she leaned close and cooed soothingly to him. "It's all right, baby... It's okay...Connie's here and I'm not goin' nowhere...I'll fix you right up and everything will be okay."

She turned her face and glared up at me. "You sonofabitch! Look at him. Look what you did to him. Why? Why did you have to bust him up so bad?"

* * * * *

Fifteen minutes later Connie and Eddie were gone.

Refusing any assistance from either Abby or me, the woman had gotten her now-damaged man to his feet and walked him over to the pickup. She helped him climb into the passenger seat of the cab and gave him a towel to hold to his face. Eddie never once looked in our direction. Connie, however, cast several poisonous glances my way as she went around quickly gathering up bits and pieces of equipment they had scattered around the site and stuffing them in the rear door of the camper shell.

Before they sped away in a spray of gravel and dust, Abby tried once more to caution the woman about seeking help and getting out of her obviously abusive relationship.

But Connie was hardly in a mood to listen. "If you're so worried about abusive assholes," she said as she climbed behind the wheel of the truck and slammed it into gear, "then how about starting with the one standing right next to you? He ought to be kept on a fucking leash!"

We stood for a long moment watching the truck's fading dust cloud. Abby was silent. Her body language was rigid, jaw muscles set tight.

I walked over to the pump, got some water flowing and washed the blood off my hands. Abby stayed where he was. When I returned to her, dangling my hands at my sides to air-dry them, she had not moved and looked like she was prepared to stand that way the rest of the morning.

"All right. Go ahead and say it," I told her. "I got carried away. I was out of line."

Her eyes flashed. "Out of line, Joe? Good God, you were like ... like nothing I'd ever seen before ... certainly not from you. What the hell *was* that?"

All I could do was shrug. "He needed to be taught a lesson. I got carried away—I already admitted that, okay?"

"No, not okay. You had him beat as soon as you took him to the ground. He was a classic bully, he didn't want to *fight*. It could have been all over right there."

"But what would have been gained? If I'd made it that easy he would have gone away believing—making excuses to himself—that I got lucky, that I sucker-punched him, caught him off balance. That it could never happen again in a million years. He would've raged and railed about it all the way home, telling it over and over to himself and to his woman until he was convinced it was the truth ... And then he would have gone right on being a bully and knocking the woman around again the first chance he got. What I was trying to do—what I *meant* to do—was dismantle him right in front of her, humiliate him, prove to both of them that he could be backed down and beaten and there wasn't a damned thing he could do about it."

"Well you beat him and humiliated him. You sure as hell accomplished that much."

"Look, I'm sorry I went a little apeshit. I'm not sure what came over me. For what it's worth, I didn't particularly like it. I'm sorry you had to see it, sorry it upset you, okay? But am I sorry Eddie got roughed up more than anybody bargained for?" I shook my head. "No, not very. He was an asshole who had most of it coming and if it had gone the other way—if he'd put *me* on the ground—he'd *still* be stomping me into the gravel."

"How about the woman? Did she end up any better off?"

"She had her chance. But she turned a deaf ear to what you tried to tell her and instead went right to consoling and placating Eddie. Right back to *enabling* him, and being too foolish to see that what it is she's enabling is more lousy treatment and beatings for herself in the future."

Abby frowned. "Maybe you're right. Okay, so never mind about them." Her expression softened somewhat and she gazed up at me, looked deep into my eyes. "But whatever came over you when you had Eddie down ... It was an ugly thing to see, Joe. It made *you* seem ugly... I don't ever want to look at you that way again."

"I'll do my best," I promised, "to see you never have to."

* * * * *

After the decidedly unpleasant encounter with Eddie and Connie we proceeded with our hike into the badlands. When I asked Abby if she'd rather call it off and come back another day she replied tersely that no, she by-God hadn't gotten up early and gone to the trouble of packing a picnic lunch and come all this way just to turn around and leave. So things started out on that somewhat strained note but before too long the stark, other-worldly beauty of the terrain worked its magic and our moods were lifted and our thoughts drawn away from the earlier episode.

There was a variety of trail options to follow once we had gone a ways. Each was marked with a degree of difficulty. The primary trail, the one from which the others branched off and then eventually returned to, was considered Moderately Difficult and consisted of a broad two-mile oval twisting through the heart of the Toadstools. That was enough of a test for my bum hip so that was the one we stuck with. To help negotiate the rugged course I used a tall, stained-oak walking stick that Abby had ordered for me from some online outfitter out of Wyoming. I hated having to admit that I needed the damn thing but it definitely made the going easier than it otherwise would have been.

While only a fraction as big as the more famous Dakota badlands off to the north, this home-grown version nevertheless provided the same sense of barren emptiness plus had distinct features and unique rock formations all its own. We came across the rubble of a few toadstool towers that had collapsed or been eroded away and spotted two or three new ones just beginning to be formed by the frequent swirling winds. But most impressive, obviously, were the ones standing tall and intact amidst the jagged cliffs and snaking gullies. The overall effect was like a garden of bone-white rock, broken and scattered and sculpted by the elements into fascinating, sometimes grotesque shapes. Abby snapped about a gazillion photos with the digital camera she had brought along.

By the time we'd nearly completed the circuit, the distasteful incidents that had marked our arrival were blurred but not erased by the sights and experiences of the hike. There'd been points along the way when I was unable to keep my thoughts from spiraling inward to try and reach the core of why I had battered and berated Eddie the way I did. I'd attempted to explain those actions to Abby, but I wasn't sure she completely bought my rationale and apparently I didn't either or it wouldn't be eating at me like it was. All I knew for sure was that it wasn't my style to keep going after a man once I had him down. Something about Eddie had triggered that in me ... or was it something about me that had been lying dormant all these years, waiting to *be* triggered?

I willed away these thoughts and questions as much as I could, tried to keep from dwelling on them. It helped that, as morning passed into afternoon, the hazy skies that were steadily beginning to darken gave me another concern to focus on. What had been the threat of a possible afternoon storm seemed increasingly certain to actually become one and I wanted to be sure and make it back to shelter before it hit.

It turned out we made it okay.

But beating the storm was minor solace compared to what else awaited us.

What I noticed first was what had been done to my vehicle. I was driving a Honda Element that year, a compact SUV that was roomy and cushy enough on the inside for my personal comfort yet had four-wheel drive and other features that made it equally suited for tooling around the lake in the performance of my security patrol duties. I was certain I had left it locked. But now, as we quit the badlands and returned to the park entrance area, I saw immediately that it had been broken into and viciously vandalized. The hood was propped up, showing cut battery cables and various other engine wiring ripped away; all four tires had been flattened; headlights, taillights, side windows --- all busted out; doors left ajar to reveal seat cushions ripped to shreds; rear hatch gaping open and all contents from within (jumper cables, tool kit, first aid kit, spare flashlight and batteries, flattened spare tire, etc.) strewn in a wide arc. And the picnic lunch Abby had prepared—torn open, thrown to the ground and urinated on.

Abby looked stunned. "Good God, Joe, what kind of fiend would do something like this!?"

I knew the answer. Knew it as certain as my own name.

"Eddie," I said through clenched teeth.

If any further verification were needed, we got it a minute later when Abby spotted something over at one of the canopied picnic tables.

"Joe, over there," she said in a quaking voice. "What is that?"

It was a body. Connie's. I went over to examine it, telling Abby to stay where she was. The victim was about as dead as you can get, propped against the edge of the table in a kind of slumped sitting position. She was battered almost beyond recognition and then her throat cut and left to bleed out so that the front of her was nothing but a crimson stain. Before turning away, I made the quirky observation that she once again had on only one flip-flop sandal and I couldn't help wondering if she had never replaced the missing one before speeding away or if it had been lost all over again during her death struggle.

I hurried back to Abby, trying to process what had happened and what might happen next and growing alarmingly aware of our vulnerability out here in the open.

The first bullet hit a second later, kicking up gravel and dust six inches behind my heel. It came from the southeast, behind and to my right. The boom of the rifle shot that sent it was immediate, indicating that the shooter was firing from a relatively short distance.

"Behind the car! Get behind the car!" I shouted to Abby as I dropped into a crouch and hustled to follow my own advice. Another shot chased us, slamming into the open passenger side rear door.

We ducked low on the far side of the Element, both of us breathing hard.

"Is that Eddie?" Abby wanted to know.

"Who the hell else?"

"He's gone completely insane!"

"Psychotic, is the word. A psycho fucking killer bent on killing some more—namely us. So much for my brilliant plan to slap him down a peg and humble him. Looks like all I did was push him over the edge of the brink he must have already been teetering on."

"You don't know that. You can't blame yourself."

"Fuck blame," I said as I lifted my pantleg and drew the little hideaway 9mm that I habitually keep holstered on my right ankle. "All I want is another crack at the bastard. This time I'll humble him permanent-like."

Another shot boomed and another slug slammed into the Element.

Then a voice boomed. Eddie's voice. "Can you hear me down there, you meddlin' fuckers? Are you happy with what you caused? Proud? You're the reason Connie-girl is layin' over there dead! You put ideas in her head and words in her sassy mouth that no man—no *real* man—could tolerate. Well, now she's paid for her sass... Next it's gonna be your turn!"

"You're crazy, Eddie," I shouted back. "You can't get away with killing all of us."

"Fuck if I can't. I already got away with killin' Connie, and I'll get you meddlers, too. And now that I'm started I got me in mind some others I may as well go take care of before I'm through. But whatever comes next ain't gonna make no difference to what we got right here and now. I'm gonna kill you first, you fat old bastard, and then I'm gonna take my own sweet time with your woman before I finish her... that can be the last thought you take with you to Hell!"

"How about we leave the woman out of it and make a run at Hell together right now," I shouted back. "You say you're a *real man*—why not step out and face me like one? We settle this the rest of the way, just the two of us."

Maniacal laughter rolled across the distance separating us. "Are you shittin' me? Are you fuckin' *shitting* me? You think this is some kind of stupid movie with a coupla Hollywood faggot tough guys like Bruce Willis or Sylvester Stallone or somethin'?... I got you trapped like a rat in a corner, fuck wad. No way in hell I'm gonna let you out for the sake of some *mano-a-mano* bullshit. Your ass is grass and I'm the lawn mower, baby. It's just a matter of time before I cut you down."

Quiet hung in the air following his retort. There was only the growling thunder of the fast-approaching storm.

Anxiously, Abby whispered, "We'll be okay as long as we stay put. Right?"

"Only if he stays put too. If he starts circling and works his way into a position where he's got us in his sights again we'll be in trouble. We won't know where he's shifted to until he fires from there."

"So far he hasn't been very accurate."

"Maybe, maybe not. I think those opening shots were just to toy with us. He wasn't ready to kill us until he made sure we'd heard his little speech."

"But you've got a gun, too. You can shoot back."

"Yeah, that's one thing that might work to our advantage—the fact he doesn't know I'm armed. Trouble is, he's got a rifle and that gives him a helluva lot more range than me. If he figures that out and hangs back far enough then this handgun isn't going to provide much counterpunch."

"How can you be so sure he's got a rifle?"

"Because those were rifle reports we heard and because I saw a gun rack in the back of the pickup when Connie was loading him into it."

Abby sank back against the side of the vehicle. "Boy, you're just full of reassuring news."

She dug a cell phone out of her pocket and flipped it open.

"That's not likely to do you much good," I said, reminding her that at least two articles we had Googled for information when planning our trip here had mentioned that accessing a cell phone signal out in this remote region was next to impossible.

"It's worth a try," she insisted as she began punching numbers. She kept at it for a full two minutes before giving up with a curse and clapping the instrument shut again.

I handed her the 9mm. "Here, I think you'll find this more reliable."

She didn't hesitate to reach for the piece, gripping it like she meant business.

I scooped around behind her and reached into the rear of the Element. One of the features of this model is that its back seats fold down flat and then are able to be lifted and latched on either side so that the whole rear section becomes a small enclosed cargo bay. Under the driver's side rear seat I had installed a securely bolted flat metal box with a combination lock. If you weren't specifically looking for it or didn't lift the seat you'd never notice it. Eddie, for example, hadn't. I unlatched the seat now and pushed up it high enough so that I could get at the box. Spun the combo lock, lifted the lid, reached in and pulled out a handful of its contents—a 1911 model Colt .45 semiauto and two spare clips. I dropped the lid and seat back down and turned once more to Abby.

"That looks like this guy's big brother," she said, her eyes traveling back and forth between the .45 I now had in my fist and the 9mm she was holding.

"It sorta is," I allowed. The little Kel-Tec nine is a great concealed carry piece, good for close range emergencies. It can fit in the palm of my hand and packs ten man-stopping rounds. But given a choice, the tried-and-true old Colt will always be what I reach for when the situation turns heavy duty.

"Does that reach as far as Eddie's rifle?"

"No. Closer, though. And at least now each of us is armed against him." From my pocket I took an extra clip for the nine and handed it to her. "You remember how to re-load and jack a cartridge into the chamber, right?"

She nodded. "I remember."

I'd taken Abby target shooting with me a couple times and in the process had taught her some handgun basics.

It had been several minutes since we'd heard anything out of Eddie. I suspected he was on the move, circling. Ducking behind the Honda had temporarily put it between us and Eddie's rifle but it still left us exposed on three sides. As I'd explained to Abby earlier, all Eddie had to do was shift to another position, one where he could get us in his sights again, and he'd have a free shot before we had any chance to react and scramble fresh cover.

In hopes of trying to get him to reveal whether or not he *was* on the move, I hollered, "Hey, Eddie! You fall asleep out there? Or, like the gas bag you are, did you just run out of hot air and guts?"

Nothing. No response. Only the low moan of the wind picking up ahead of the storm.

Eddie might be crazy but he wasn't dumb. He was too smart to answer and give me a sound indicator of where he was. So the fucker was on the move for sure. Circling. But where, which way?

Abby said, "He's re-positioning himself like you said, isn't he?"

"Afraid so."

Pocketing the clip I'd given her, she said, "So. You got a plan?"

"I'm workin' on it... "

The thunder of the building storm was rumbling louder now and as the sky grew darker flashes of brilliant lighting had begun to sizzle out of it. Glancing upward, I said, "It might be that we're going to have to count on a little divine intervention."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

I jabbed a thumb toward the heavens. "If that storm hits hard enough and sudden enough, the cover of a heavy rain could give us the chance to make a break for better protection. One way or another we need to get out of this spot before Eddie turns us into sitting ducks."

"Where should we try and make it to?"

"That sod house would give us cover on all four sides. But we'd still be trapped. A better move, I think—a riskier one but also a more unexpected one—would be to try for the Toadstools."

"Back into the badlands?"

"Sometimes the best way out is through."

"You giving me philosophy now? What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

"It means if we can make it into those rocks we'd no longer be pinned down. We could stay on the move and try to get away from Eddie, or if he gives chase we might even be able to set a trap or an ambush for him. Think about all the twists and turns and blind corners in there. The range of his rifle wouldn't mean shit anymore. Everything would be cut to a matter of a few yards or even a few feet. And

our handguns would suddenly be just as effective as his damn rifle—even more so, since he's unaware we're even armed."

Abby's eyes shone brighter. "I like the sound of that a lot better than being pinned down in the soddy."

"That's my girl," I said, grinning.

But the grin got wiped off my face an instant later when a rifle report cracked and I felt a searing pain slice through my left side just below the ribs. I spun and fell back against the Element. Abby cried out. Instinctively I raised the .45—which meant revealing the fact I was armed, but to hell with trying to hide that now—and began squeezing off rounds in the direction the shot had come from.

"Around back! Around back!" I shouted to Abby, shoving her toward the rear of the Honda.

I started after her. My knees buckled momentarily but I shoved myself upright again long enough to make a single long stride before lunging into an awkward, half-falling dive past the shattered remains of the left rear taillight. Another slug ricocheted off the side of the vehicle just behind me.

I hit the ground hard, painfully, but immediately scrambled another four feet on the chewing dirt and gravel until I sensed I had the diagonal length of the Element between me and the source of the rifle fire. Abby was there, reaching for me.

"Joe! How bad are you hit?"

I rolled onto my back and groaned. I still gripped the .45 in my right fist. I could feel my side turning wet and sticky with blood. It hurt like hell but lifting my shirt and probing with my left hand I quickly determined that it could have been a damn sight worse. "You know those love handles I've been trying to get shed of?" I said to Abby through clenched teeth. "I think Eddie just did me a favor and shot away part of one."

Her expression showed a struggle between wanting to be relieved but not trusting that she should be. "Move your hand so I can see," she said.

While Abby was examining me, Eddie called out to us.

"How you doin' there, old man? You all of a sudden got yourself a belly ache, do ya?"

"Nothing I can't handle, asswipe," I called back. "I hadn't had lunch yet so all you did was help me forget my hunger pangs."

"Glad I could oblige. Tell you what...Stick your mangy old head out around the corner of that Jap fuckin' car you got there and I'll be happy to also take your mind off any headaches you were ever fixin' to have."

"Thanks for the offer but I think I'll pass. As lousy as you shoot you'd probably just manage to plunk off my nose or something and only spoil my handsome good looks."

"Yeah? Well speakin' of lousy shots you sure ain't no ribbon-winner with that pistol gun you whipped out. You didn't come within ten feet of me... Not a bad lookin' gun, though. Be proud to add it to my collection after I pry it outta your cold, dead fingers."

"Why wait?" I responded. "Step out where I can see you and you can start adding to your collection right away—bullets first."

Eddie was done talking. He went silent again.

The wind ahead of the storm was coming colder and harder now, rattling gravel and grains of sand all around us.

Abby had been wearing a sleeveless white blouse over a pale orange tube top, the front of the blouse tied below her breasts to leave exposed a band of flat, tanned tummy. In order to tend my wound, she'd removed the blouse and was tearing it into strips now, saying, "You were right, it looks like the bullet just passed through fatty tissue. If we can get the bleeding stopped I don't think it's too bad. But I can't do anything about the pain."

"Pain I can handle," I said as she pressed makeshift bandages over the entrance and exit holes and then cinched them in place with the remaining tied-together strips of the blouse. When she was finished, I sat up. It hurt like a bitch and in spite of my bravado I couldn't keep from grimacing.

"That storm is going to cut loose any minute," I said, ejecting the partially spent slip from the .45 and heeling in a fresh one. "When it does, we need to make our move."

"Into the badlands. Got it."

"There's that deep-worn gully just ahead of where the rocks start. Remember? We passed through it going in and then followed it part way as we came out. Make for that. Duck down into it as soon as you're there. Stay with it and veer to the right, it starts getting even deeper in that direction."

"Where will you be?"

"Right behind you. But don't look for me, don't wait for me. Just go as hard and as fast as you can."

"But..."

"No 'buts'. Just do like I say. Look, you can move a lot faster than me. I got a fucked up hip to begin with and now I've got a bullet hole in me. But don't let that slow you down, you hear me?"

"But I can't..."

"Yes, you can! You have to. At least one of us has to make it out of here alive or Eddie wins the whole damn day. We're not going to let that happen, do you understand? I'll be along just as quick as I'm able. As soon as you make it to a place where you can find good cover, you can stop and wait for me a little bit. But not too long. If I'm not there in a few minutes it means I've either stopped to deal with Eddie or... "

"No! Don't say it."

"No matter what, *you* have to keep going. The best way out is through, remember? That means through the Toadstools and out the other side. You may need to stop and hole up for the night. Find a good spot. Then watch where the sun rises in the morning. Head toward it. East. Sooner or later you'll come to those railroad tracks we crossed driving in. Follow them back to town. Stay on the tracks, *don't* try to find a road. If Eddie makes it by me... "

"Goddamnit, Joe, stop! You're scaring the shit out of me."

"Good. Then be scared enough and smart enough to do exactly as I say and you'll..."

A massive thunderclap cut me short. An instant later, like a floodgate thrown open, the rain came. Hard, cold, intense rain slamming down in wind-whipped sheets.

"Go! Go!" I shouted to Abby, and together we shoved away from the Honda.

As expected, she quickly began to pull away from me. In a matter of seconds the shape of her out ahead grew more and more blurred by pounding rain as the distance between us increased. That was good on two counts: One, it meant Abby was doing as instructed; two, it meant that if I couldn't see her clearly then both of us had to be only marginally visible (at best) from Eddie's vantage point.

I charged ahead over the rough ground. The grass and patches of clay base were rapidly becoming slippery under the deluge. Once or twice I thought I heard the crack of Eddie's rifle but it was hard to be certain through the hissing rain and staccato bursts of thunder and lightning.

I reached the gully and half-slid, half-fell into it. There were a couple inches of water already swirling in the bottom. This, on top of silt-stone dust and lava dust and more clay-rich earth, was like trying to get traction on a greased track. I slipped and fell heavily against the gully's edge at one point, catching myself to keep from ending up flat on my ass but raking my wounded side across jagged rock in the process.

I ran down the deepening gully for what seemed like a long time but was probably only a few minutes. My side was on fire, my breath was coming in ragged bursts. The water I was splashing through was getting deeper, bubbling higher around my ankles and beginning to flow in a kind of current. The hammering rain showed no sign of lessening.

And then, abruptly, hands reached out for me and arms wrapped around me, tugging me in close. It was Abby. She had pulled up under a slice of flattened boulder that had broken away from some higher point and then landed in such a manner as to jut out over one side of the gully. I pressed in tight against her and we embraced. She was shivering. The bared skin of her arms and shoulders was slick, cold.

There was some object wedged in beside her. Before I could ask, Abby said, "It's your walking stick. I grabbed it and brought it along. I figure when we leave this rockpile together—and I'm determined we will—it'll come in handy for you."

I smiled. "Good to have confidence."

"You and me—s . That's what I got confidence in."

I shoved the .45 in my waistband and just held her for a minute, not saying anything, letting my breathing level off.

Abby touched one hand to my side and then pulled it away. She held it out to show a palmful of rain-smearred crimson under a brilliant burst of lightning. "Joe, you're still bleeding."

"I tore it open again, back there a ways. It's not that bad."

"You won't be able to keep going if you lose too much blood."

"We *have* to keep going."

"Not necessarily. When you first mentioned making a break for these rocks you said we might be able to set an ambush for Eddie. What about that? If he comes after us we've got as much advantage now as him. We can hole up—like you told me to do, remember?—and wait for him to show himself. If he does, we'll be ready to blast him."

"You think we're all of a sudden Mr. And Mrs. Rambo or something?"

"You'll never stop bleeding if you keep on the move. We need to find a spot with enough shelter to get out of this rain. We can warm each other and give your wound a chance to clot."

"I'll hole up, then. Like I said before..."

"I know what you said before. That's what got us this far. But now..."

Abby paused to listen. I heard it, too. A low rumble that seemed to be gaining volume. Not thunder. Not quite like anything I'd ever heard before. A sustained sound, sort of like a rush of wind coming through trees, growing louder and closer... And then, somehow, I *knew*!

I'd often heard the term *flash flood*. But back in the flatlands of northern Illinois and southern Wisconsin, where I'd grown up, it was a phenomenon rarely applicable to the terrain except in the immediate vicinity of a river. Out here in the broken land of western Nebraska, however—the high plains that lead up to the Colorado Rockies and the Laramie mountain ranges of Wyoming—any creek bed or dry wash or narrow gap on the downslope of higher ground could be turned by a sudden thunderstorm into a brief but sometimes deadly raging torrent.

That's exactly what was happening now. All the cracks and crevices and shallower arroyos running through the higher rock formations that studded the heart of the Toadstool badlands twisted their way ever downward until eventually emptying into this lowest, deepest gully that looped like a belt around the base of the ragged moonscape. Rapid accumulation and convergence above meant an accelerated, pressurized release below—filling the low gulch with a sudden influx of runoff that built almost instantly into a churning, tumbling, crushing bank of water coursing furiously down this channel cut and deepened over thousands of years by tens of thousands of previous storm releases.

And Abby and I were right in its path!

The storm that had provided a chance to escape being gunned down by Eddie now was producing a new threat every bit as dangerous.

As the four-foot-high wall of foaming, boiling, brown-gray mud and water raced toward us, I grabbed Abby around the waist, lifted her, and shoved as hard as I could to push her up over the edge of the gully.

I was unable to tell for sure whether or not she made it clear before the water hit me.

I was knocked off my feet and then swept along like a beach ball caught in a crashing surf. First hammered down, then lifted and rolled and popped to the surface before being churned back down and rolled again, all the while carried forward with the rush of angry water. I flailed my arms and kicked my legs, reaching, grabbing—half trying to swim, half trying to grasp something I might be able to cling to in order to keep from drowning. But my hands only slipped off muddy, greasy, worn-smooth rock surfaces or came away with handfuls of loose gravel that crumbled uselessly between my fingers.

At last, though, my hands *did* close around something hard, solid. My walking stick, being swept along with me. I clutched it and held on tight. I didn't know why, it sure as hell wasn't enough to keep me afloat or anything, but it felt good all the same. And then I got a desperate idea. Maybe... just maybe...

As I broke above the surface once again, hungrily gulping for air, I twisted around and thrust the walking stick out ahead of me, gripping it with both hands, holding it horizontally at arms' length as I continued to hurtle down the gully. What I was hoping was that if I came to some narrowed portion of the gulch perhaps I could jam the walking stick crossways securely enough to gain leverage for pulling free of the sucking current.

I got my wish—the first part at least—almost immediately. The walking stick jammed solidly at a point where a rockslide had caved in one side of the gully. But the force of the surging water drove me against the suddenly lodged staff harder than I'd anticipated. I heard and felt a rib crack. Much of the breath I'd fought so hard to keep my lungs filled with between the underwater rolls exploded out of me.

The torrent pushed me under and past the stick, but I managed to still get it locked in the crook of my right arm and there was no way in hell I was going to let go. I hand-walked over to one end of the staff and attempted to gain some kind of purchase on the jumble of spilled rocks. The water continued to pound against me, trying to knock me away.

I almost made it. I had one foot planted firmly on an underwater boulder and was ready to start pulling myself up when a bulky, heavy object—the body of another person—slammed into me. The sudden impact and our combined weight were too much for the walking stick. It snapped in two like a matchstick. Once again I went spinning away in the rush of water.

My first thought was that the other body must be Abby. For this reason I hung on tight, grasping for clothing, hair, whatever I could get hold of to keep her—keep both of us—afloat. I quickly realized, however, that it wasn't Abby I was struggling to hang on to at all, but rather the form of another man... Eddie!

The realization hit only a fraction of a second before the two of us came crashing against a second rockslide that had tumbled down into the gully. This slide was larger than the previous one, which presented more opportunity for something to catch hold of but it also meant a considerable narrowing of

the gulch so that the water here shot through with increased force and velocity. But in a quirky stroke of luck (and I sure as hell needed some *good* luck for a change) the force of the water worked momentarily to my favor by jamming my back and shoulders into a crevice of jagged boulders and continuing to pound against me, essentially pinning me there. But at least I wasn't tumbling away with the increased current, my head was above the surface, and I was able to breathe.

Trouble was, Eddie was jammed in right beside me.

At first, when his body crashed against mine, it had seemed like dead weight and I thought whoever it was must be unconscious. I quickly discovered now that was not the case.

With rainwater pouring down over his face, his mouth spread in a hellish grin, and the maniacal fire that danced in his eyes heightened by a burst of lightning, Eddie looked over at me and said, "I got you now, you old bastard. I'm gonna kill you if it's the last fuckin' thing I do!"

His hand clamped like an iron vise on my throat and he began to push me down under the water.

The way we were positioned against the rockslide he'd ended up slightly higher than me, giving him something of an advantage. Plus he was strong as an ox and stone crazy. I sensed without the slightest doubt that if he could get both hands clamped on my windpipe he would have no qualms about allowing the current to carry us away together as long as he was able to keep his hold and throttle me in the process. And while shoving out into the current once more might offer me the chance to break his grip, it was something I was willing to try only as a last resort.

Instead I went with his downward thrust, allowing him to push me under with little or no resistance. This caught him by surprise and tipped him slightly off balance. Once underwater I immediately reached for the .45 in my waistband. It wasn't there, washed away at some point as I'd tumbled in the grip of the flood. So much for my run of good luck. I mentally cursed but had no time to dwell on the lousy break. Course-correcting, I grabbed for Eddie's legs, meaning to yank them out from under him and spill him off into the strongest part of the current. But that didn't work either. He squatted down, lowering his center of gravity, then kicked my hands away and tried to stomp my already-damaged ribs. All the while he maintained the crushing grip on my throat. Struggling to break free, maybe starting to panic a little now, I groped at the jumble of rocks we were plastered against, hoping to pull one loose that I could use to smash Eddie's hand with. No rocks pulled free but in place of that my fist closed around an old friend—one half of my broken walking stick.

I gripped the length of oak tightly and thrust its jagged, broken end up into the underside of Eddie's forearm. I could feel it tear through meat and muscle and could hear Eddie howl even above the surface of the rushing water and still-raging storm. He let go of my throat and I kicked for the surface, my head and shoulders breaking through. Eddie was waiting. As I was simultaneously spitting water and sucking for air he clubbed the side of my face with a massive fist. I could see strings of blood fly away from the underside of his arm, starkly crimson against the muddy brown spray of water.

I blocked his next attempted punch and whipped the point of an elbow into his ribs. This rocked him, but my feet slipped on the greasy underwater rocks before I could follow up. As I scrambled to regain purchase, Eddie's un-lacerated left arm reached above his head and the hand clawed and dug frantically at the rocks and broken rubble there. He was trying to do the same thing I'd attempted below the surface—pull loose a chunk of rock to hammer and smash me with.

And before I could right myself entirely, he found one! I heard the rattle of pebbles as he tore it free and saw his hand raise with a melon-sized stone clutched tight. As if to admire this accomplishment, Eddie momentarily lifted his face and gazed up at the prize. In that brief instant I had before he brought the stone crashing down, with Eddie's face and chin lifted in presumed triumph, my heels dug once more into solid footing. I didn't hesitate. I lunged upward with all the strength I had left in me, thrusting again with the jagged end of the walking stick, driving it through the soft pad of flesh just above the Adam's apple and then on up into the writhing snake nest that was Eddie's brain.

The stone slipped harmlessly from his grasp. Eddie's body teetered for a moment, seemed to sag in on itself, then toppled over into the strongest part of the torrent and disappeared.

* * * * *

I made no attempt to climb out of the water for a long time. I just clung to the cold, wet rocks, shivering, feeling the pain and exhaustion throb through me.

When I at last crawled up onto the bank, I immediately felt queasy and light-headed. I collapsed and once more just lay there for a time. I must have blacked out at some point. When I lifted my head again, the rain had stopped. Gone, too, the thunder and lightning. The remaining clouds in the sky were no longer thick and angry and black but had faded to a smoky gray, faintly swirling, starting to break apart.

The water in the gully had slowed to a steady current, still rapid and muddy brown but no longer the destructive torrent that had raged there before.

I pushed creakily to my feet.

The flood had stripped away my shirt and the bandage Abby had fashioned for me. The bullet hole, caked with mud from the way I had lain, seemed to have stopped bleeding. But it still hurt like hell. So did my ribs. So did everything else. But the greatest pain came from an aching question that suddenly jolted my still-clearing mind. What had become of Abby!?

I took a staggering, unsteady step back toward where I had left her.

I called her name in an anguished tone.

And then, caught in the first rays of late afternoon sunlight slanting down through a fresh opening in the clouds, there on the opposite bank she stood. Drenched, disheveled, smeared with mud, hair matted and tangled... but no woman ever looked more beautiful to the eyes of any man.

END

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WOMAN, 59, BRUTALLY SLAIN IN HOME INVASION

by

Fred Zackel

*It was the great Ross Macdonald who first recognized the talent of Fred Zackel. The author of **Cocaine and Blue Eyes** (1978) and **Cinderella After Midnight** (1980), along with numerous other novels and short stories, he teaches at Bowling Green State University in Ohio. Trivia buffs should note that the 1983 TV adaptation of **Cocaine and Blue Eyes** was co-produced by O.J. Simpson, who also starred as Zackel's detective, Michael Brennen. "Look at it this way," Zackel says: "I was discovered by Ross Macdonald and O.J. Simpson. That can haunt you in the wee hours of the night." **Cocaine and Blue Eyes** has been reissued by Point Blank Press.*

Five hours before she died, Mia Sweet was giddy with exhaustion when she came outside after work, and the winter wind off the lake caught her off-balanced.

She was so cold, when her shoe laces came untied, she walked a full city block until she found a warm store to go into to tie that shoe lace.

The bus pulling up at her stop was her savior.

The twilight of the day, when hope is dimming like sunlight, she thought, and here is the bus that'll take me home, halleluiah!

Mia Sweet looked like she had been slapped hard. She lived on the razor's edge. She took medication for bipolar disorder and schizophrenia. Neighbors frequently saw her ambling through the park like she was sleepwalking.

An old woman, she still had the hint of her younger self's looks.

She had a kind face. Her eyes were cornflower blue, her skin was very white, almost translucent, and her cheekbones red as if from being briskly rubbed.

In fact, her round pretty face, her creamy complexion and her apple pink cheeks said she once had a baby face, albeit a baby face now bitch-slapped by age and battered by gravity. These days she had pale circles under her eyes and eyebrows that had been plucked too often.

Mia Sweet worked hard. Strands of her hair stuck to the perspiration on her cheeks. Some nights waves of fatigue would wash over her. Some nights, like tonight, she worked after hours for the Carnegie Avenue Meat Company. She got off work two hours later than usual.

The meat market sold goat and lamb by special order. Even sold turkeys specially prepared according to Islamic law.

For meat to be *halal*, or permissible under Islamic law, a prayer had to be said before the animal's throat is slit with a razor-sharp knife by a Muslim, Christian or Jew, the three believers referred to in the Koran.

Her boss always said, "Turkeys are the wave of the future."

Her boss had hair gel that attracted flies.

Twice a week she alone got overtime.

"Halal is as good as kosher," her boss always said.

Mia Sweet knew what kosher and what Halal meat were. Jewish law states that kosher mammals and birds must be slaughtered according to a strict set of guidelines. The slaughter, which is also called the *shechita*, was designed to minimize the pain inflicted on the animals.

Mia always snickered. "They still get their necks slashed."

And the blood was allowed to completely drain out.

She stayed late to witness but not assist the slaughterer, also called the *shochet*. He was some Jewish guy named Moshe who used a large razor-sharp metal knife with absolutely no irregularities, nicks or dents, who made a single cut across the throat to avoid tearing the animal's veins.

She got overtime, and she wasn't even Jewish.

She found and sat on a bench by the back door and then started combing out her long hair. She used the time to scrutinize everyone else on the bus. She was the only white person on the city bus from downtown, and it scared her. I could be the victim of a racist attack, she thought, keeping her guard up and her eyes down.

She wore her ancient cassette player on the city bus. Nobody would steal it, she knew, and she also knew no one would bother her with their crap. When she wanted to listen in on the sounds around her, she switched the player off but left the headphones on. That way she could monitor the punks on the bus.

She carried her work knife, too. Always. She kept it up the left sleeve of her coat, with her right hand resting on the bone handle.

She rode the city bus and memorized every passenger.

When she got off at her stop, she went right to the gay bar.

She lived on the other side of the tracks. In Collinwood, living on the wrong side of the track was no social faux pas, merely the result of geography. The rail yard cut the town in two.

She was careful walking across the tracks. The wind was howling like an unhappy ghoul, and she wouldn't hear a train until it was upon her.

The gusts of wind turned her in a new direction. Snow devils popped up in doorways, where the wind currents were most erratic, churning furiously in tight circles. A constant stream of fine snow came off rooflines.

Mia Sweet lived above West Hell, the only gay bar in North Collinwood. A canvas awning over the saloon tried slapping the howling wind away. Window glass rattling in its putty.

A place nobody knows but me.

Inside the joint, with four hours and seventeen minutes left to her life, she tossed back two glasses of white wine. She got snookered there. Tanked up higher than a kite but loaded down lower than a jumper on a wind-swept bridge.

She rubbed her face, but her arms were exhausted. Goddamn job was driving her batty, she thought.

Her bartender buddy brought her another drink.

"To go," she said. "Put it on my tab."

"Bring the glass back," he said. "Bring all the glasses back."

Yeah, yeah, yeah. Someday.

With less than three hours and forty-one minutes remaining, she left the bar and went upstairs. She lived above the bar. Narrow concrete stairs leading up to a small, cluttered one-room apartment with wash basin, toilet, bed and cupboards.

She called her apartment the one-room rat trap.

This place was hell on earth, as far as she was concerned.

A mattress on the floor, tangles of sheets and blankets, dirty clothes scattered around the floor like rose petals on a pond.

Her only chair was a plastic lawn chair by the small window.

No rugs, no books and no pictures on the green stained walls.

With no air-conditioning and a tiny space heater, a cold wind blew in through double doors. One winter she bought a three foot Christmas tree, and the tree shivered with her all month from the drafts below the doors and from the locked windows.

Some winters she had either heat or hot water, but not both. Then the gay guy downstairs bought the building and her life improved.

But she got the sunlight from the west, so what the hell.

She heard the toilet running when she walked in.

Bobbie was gone now; the place seemed empty.

Goddamn Bobbie Kreutznaer. He always left things fucked up and running. Remembering him last night drunk and stealing kisses. My high school sweetheart, after all these years.

You weren't the only one loving me, she thought. You weren't even my first. Your brother was. And you are still a married man.

As always, she threw her oversized winter parka across the foot of her air mattress when she came home. Doing that helped keep the mattress warm.

Live alone and discover how loud your wristwatch could be. She knew her Bible. "How can one be warm alone?" Ecclesiastes 4:11, it was.

She searched the apartment, knife in hand, room to room, looking for unlikely things hiding under her bed. The toilet still running.

She went and jiggled the handle to get the noise to stop. She had to face up to the pantyhose hanging from coat hangers like drying calamari on a Greek island.

Cold enough in the bathroom to see her frosty white breath.

This old wood building offered little protection against the icy winters off Lake Erie. And heating this dump was so expensive, even in off-years.

She said to her mirror, "Where is global warming when you need it?"

At home, as always she talked to her faux gilded mirror.

Mia Sweet had zip illusions. She was in her late-fifties, closer to Social Security than her last orgasm. More nuts than sane, she was.

She had been dead asleep, when Bobbie Kreutznaer drunk-dialed her, acting as if forty years hadn't passed. This call was not fun for her. In truth, he had little effect on her adult life, save the fact that he was an escape route she had trusted in that had vanished overnight.

"I won't listen to him. I do that for myself, my sanity."

Then she giggled at that. Her sanity. Ha!

For years Bobbie lingered like a jukebox song in her memory.

"I'm in town!" ended that song.

Seeing the nearly sixty Bobbie was a great shock. His face had been transformed in so many ways. He had gained weight, and his face had gone smooth, almost featureless.

Why should she help Bobbie? Years ago he had abandoned her. Now he comes back with no remorse and thinks he can mooch his way back into my heart?

Her life had been hard. Why have him complicate things by coming back? Not like he'd stay this time, either.

She told herself, "I start listening to Bobbie again, I'd be standing there fucked with my clothes on."

In the refrigerator she found a pan of chicken fried rice, so she made two chicken fried rice tacos and used lots of spicy salsa inside and microwaved them. That gave her three hours and eight minutes left in her life.

She examined the garlic fries left over from last weekend carefully and deliberately and then turned them down. Bobbie K. might call and want to meet.

On the other hand, she didn't throw away the fries.

She looked at the clock. No. It was too late for Bobby K. to call.

Still slightly drunk, she ate sitting on the air mattress; that took up half the room. She ate staring at the flesh-colored walls in her kitchen and the green stained walls in her main room. Living in this dump, she always knew where the fire extinguisher was.

Shabby Collinwood, a place only to live. Shabby and battered and boarded up. Shabby awnings and rusted rain gutters.

She brushed that aside. Why should I get anything better? Most of my childhood friends ended up in prison or got killed. Christ, I am alive and okay.

With less than three hours left, she lit a candle in the dim room. Her evening was planned: watching westerns on cable television and later eating defrosted hamburgers. But then the phone rang.

Who would call me?

She grabbed a 13-inch kitchen knife to answer it.

Mia Sweet knew she was not well-brought-up. Before she left the house, she checked her knife in its sheath. When the doorbell rang, she'd grab a knife. But a knife to answer the phone, *sheesh*, was a sign she was getting worse again.

She answered her cell phone. One of the Little Old Ladies from the Rosary Society calling to remind her . . . *yada yada yada*.

Mia Sweet stopped listening. She didn't want to go to Saint Dismas this evening. Didn't want to hear their crises. Little Old Ladies of Gossip.

At two hours and thirty-six minutes before she was killed, she looked out her only window at the chain-link fence topped with barbed wire and the abandoned machine shop beyond. At the back of the plant, a stack of broken wood pallets standing guard by a rail siding. The CSX yard beyond that.

She heard a train rattling over tracks, but couldn't see it.

She told the glass pane, “When I was a kid, I used to call the railroad tracks cinnamon sticks to the future. You ride a train west into the Magic Kingdom. In those days I didn’t mean Disney.”

The tracks sang, she remembered. As a little girl, she learned the tracks vibrated. They were like a tuning fork up your ass that makes your spine tingle, twist and then resonate with the tracks themselves.

Rusty tracks now from a rail yard long closed. Hard to remember why I stayed here, she thought.

Mia Sweet had given up trying to escape. She no longer wanted to leave Collinwood, Ohio. Her fists clenched. Bobbie Kreutznaer was too much a shit by coming back here. She want to rip him in two pieces, no, more than two pieces. She wanted to rip him to shreds like toilet tissue.

She angrily cursed at the rail yard. The barbed wire fence. The naked yard light always on, rain or shine, day or night. A line of fresh footprints from the alley next door across her back yard, through the hole in the fence to the rusted caboose abandoned, and then back the way the first prints had come. Her eyes followed the foot prints. Like watching a man falling down a flight of stairs, she thought, we can’t help ourselves.

She eyed the derelict rail car in the rail yard that sat alone under the security lights outside her only bathroom window and the neon pastel graffiti upon it, some of it filthy and obscene, about the women the graffiti artists desired.

They were love poems, she thought. She remembered what to be desired felt like, and she rolled the naughty idea around in her head like a brightly colored marble. How sweet men and boys can be, she thought, when they tried.

Beyond the rail yard was the woods.

When she was a child living on Wyndham Street, from Mia’s bedroom window, she saw red eyes watching from the woods. Animals watching her from the woods. When she was young, they were guardians that kept her dad from going too far in smacking Mia Sweet around.

Once she was old enough to worry, she worried.

She dozed for an hour and heard the toilet again.

Goddamn toilet. She had to go jiggle the handle.

I’m going to flush that man right out of my life.

Lingering in the bathroom, Mia Sweet plucked the black hairs around her nipples. Her old sweetheart was back in town. Hope he hadn’t noticed them.

Oh, she would make Bobbie pay for fucking her over. At the same time, she might get lucky, too. She wouldn’t fight so hard that she couldn’t get lucky.

She started plotting, a chess player thinking several moves ahead. Where do I want to stand if I do get lucky?

Mia Sweet slept alone and never stopped remembering how wonderful sleeping with a man was. To reach over and cuddle. To spoon. To breathe his breath, hold his body, smell his scent.

The man! His smile.

He looked good. He was warm!

Even if unhappily married all these years.

Now Mia wanted to see if she could get a wedge in.

Still and all, Bobbie was a flake with a charming smile.

She vaguely remembered his brother Rooster as a translucent redhead. That is, Rooster was one of those bright redheads who had skin so white that they almost appeared to be translucent. He filled your vision like a billboard up close. Took my breath away he did.

On the other hand, Mia Sweet remembered well Rooster and his casual swagger. A smile to melt every girl. What they had was not a wham-bam-thank-you-ma'am, but a two day total immersion.

Rooster could charm the panties off any girl.

Rooster was a big guy, but very relaxed. Very sure of himself. He always had these incredible chicks chasing him, circling over him like vultures waiting to swoop down on him. He was charming and spooky and cool and always a gentleman. He was the peacock. In truth, as she learned, a troubled man, he spent a lot of money on clothes. His nice clothes covered a multitude of inadequacies.

The sex was okay. He made love like he was stabbing a dragon with his prick. She kept looking over her shoulder at him stretching and straining, but his face was a blank implacable mask, his penis a cruel, bitter force, busy ignoring her.

By the end of their first hour together, she was bored by Rooster Kreutznaer. Men always talking about themselves – as always. Always the same song, Mia Sweet thought. The biggest testicles have the smallest brains.

Mia Sweet snorted her disgust. His big white smile was no substitute for a personality or a conscience or a heart. He was a cold-hearted man.

“Bobbie, on the other hand, I smelled his armpit once and I got excited forever.”

They dated like he was virgin. Next thing one night she knew he had her by the hair, her head was pulled back, and he was fiercely tonguing her. She came when he was still kissing her neck. Well, once she came. She thought there would be more. Rest of the time, he came, and then he went away.

Once Mia Sweet looked eye to eye with him, he locked eyes, and then, first he complimented her, how lovely she looked, how smart she was, how sexy her eyes, and then told her he loved her. One kiss was enough to convince her.

Blue eyes bright as marbles set in a bone-white face surrounded by a mop of carrot-red hair and a smile that made her smile, too.

Baby-faced Bobbie K. waited until she couldn't help herself.

She loved his chest, his arms, his legs, how strong they were when he held her, but his smell drove her nuts when she got too close to him.

She could come smelling him.

Didn't need sex. Just smelling him was enough.

She felt like a wild bird was caged in her chest, fluttering madly to escape. Oh this man . . . Her tongue had broken; she couldn't speak. Heard her pulse in her ears. She felt so erotic. She was afraid she was trembling and all the world could see her.

I thought we were attached. That was my biggest delusion. I saw a sensuality that reached across and maybe beyond. I thought we were in the groove. Bobbie saw a well-worn rut and jumped like a needle on a turntable.

A love as true as a horse with horns.

Je ne regrette rien, she thought. I do not regret anything.

Revisiting the past sucked. Like looking behind a heavy piece of furniture that hasn't been moved in memory. Only, sometimes it was necessary.

Mia said, "All those times long ago, putting on my clothes again, my hands shaking, sometimes unable to button buttons or snap my snaps, frightened, maybe even terrified, I knew I should do something, take some action. My girlfriends said I should make Bobbie a committed man. I should get pregnant, make him do the right thing.

He went and married Annette LaCapra. His brother's widow.

When he left me for Annette, her girlfriends said, "I told you so."

She told the Bobbie who was from thirty-eight years ago, "You married her and took my heart away with her."

* * * * *

Forty-seven minutes remained in Mia Sweet's life. She was primping in front of her bathroom mirror. Sultry but innocent, she decided. But the wrong shade of lipstick, she decided.

She had no intention of leaving the house tonight.

For almost forty years Mia Sweet hated Bobbie Kreutznaer. What made his cruelty so unforgivable was that dirty dog had been oh so casual at ruining her life.

Back then Bobbie showered her with attention, and she appreciated it. Other guys had their cars. He only had eyes for her. Or so she thought.

She told him she wanted to leave Cleveland. Bobbie told her she would get out of Collinwood with him. He would take her west on a train to see the ocean. She believed him. She always believed everything he said.

But then, as he rushed to console and then marry his dead brother's widow, he never gave her a backward look.

With thirty-three minutes to go, Sweetie said, "Am I supposed to imagine I'm suddenly Cinderella and Bobbie is suddenly Prince Charming? That he is going to take me away from all this shit?"

Stay real, she scolded herself.

I am not going to give myself over to him again. What happened then, well, couldn't be help, and it was old news, anyway.

Her heart was lukewarm as dishwater.

When Bobbie Kreutznaer was younger, his pale Irish skin and his curly red hair were his trademark. He had puppy eyes. He had a wide smile. Freckles.

A smile to melt all the girls.

He had mastered the fake smile.

But not as good as his brother Rooster.

He was still hot nookie.

Don't go near him, her mother said. He is like a snake in the dark.

You're buying sick puppies.

He is as innocent as the Fox.

But I couldn't take my eyes off him, she lamented.

He was a fantasy, a pipedream.

Cold despair. Lying awake in despair in the night. Lonely as a purse without money. At times she didn't think she could make it through a day without him.

Time takes small bites out of us. Soon we are all consumed.

Mia Sweet looked in her bathroom mirror and loudly cursed Bobbie Kreutznaer, who was not present. "You dumped Mia Sweet, a great piece of ass, for sloppy seconds from Annette LaCapra."

Mia Sweet cursed Annette. *Die forever, you stupid woman.*

* * * * *

Mia Sweet was left behind with empty hands. Those first years she looked at the wedding ring on her finger, the invisible one she pretended Bobbie Kreutznaer had given her, a diamond set within pearls.

The wedding ring he never gave her.

The one he gave Annette LaCapra.

Bobbie was living the wrong life.

She told the mirror, “You were supposed to spend time, money and energy on a kid what wasn’t yours? What the fuck was wrong with you, you fucking stupid man?”

Every time that thought crossed her mind, she imagined a high school graduation ceremony, her own graduation being the ceremonial highlight of her life, except for the wedding Bobbie Kreutznaer denied her. She saw Bobbie sitting in the school auditorium with a big white cartoon balloon over his head like a cloud with the word “sucker” inside.

She would look at that fool and shake her head.

“You married Annette LaCapra.”

Bobbie Kreutznaer fucked up my life, she thought.

Finally she decided she would have him murdered.

For decades she had plotted his murder. Sometimes so inarticulate with rage, so lost in the violent plotting of his demise in some horribly vicious fashion, she would walk into a brick wall.

Always have hope, her mother said.

Over the years she had forgotten Bobbie Kreutznaer.

Yesterday, when she saw him again, she was giddy with the opportunity to kill him. The only thought in her mind, it enveloped her like a burqa, from her toes up, every inch of her hands and her arms, even her fingernails, a black veil over her mouth, only her outraged eyes to betray her, yet a knife up her sleeve.

She divined a hundred methods to kill him. Her favorite fantasy? Bobbie face-down in one of those car-sized buckets of molten asphalt at some parking lot getting repaved. Better yet, have somebody else whack him and take the rap.

But, after almost forty years of silent powerless rage, she had three prerequisites to this perfect crime. She kills him, he knows she’s doing the killing, and she gets away with the murder.

No matter how she plotted it, always one of them eluded her.

Now he was back.

Who do I tell he's here?

* * * * *

Now that he had returned, the brand-new Bobbie Kreutznaer was a jerk, but Mia Sweet was amused by the attention he gave her. More than that, she was curious, like looking inside the back of the ambulances at accidents. If she were really lucky, his life was a ruin. Knowing that would please her.

She was too old for his nonsense.

Bobbie was like a message in a bottle thrown overboard coming back to you. Rain on the ocean, she thought.

“An evil spirit wants payback,” she hissed.

She had bad memories of both brothers Kreutznaer.

After they left Mia started taking lithium for her bi-polar disorder. For years she had been taking lithium to treat paranoid schizophrenia. Still, her moods were everywhere. For years she was unable to hold a steady job.

Back in those days, she had been taking lithium to treat paranoid schizophrenia. Mia's hallucinations always gave her comfort. But, boy, did they fuck up her networking. And the time she spent squatting at the psychiatric ward of the North Collinwood Medical Center, talking to an electric wall socket, the skin on the back of her neck still tingled.

If I lived in Iraq, Al Qaeda would make me a suicide bomber. On the other hand, I'm too paranoid.

We're only as crazy as we think we are.

Who is any person to judge us on the way we think?

Twenty-seven minutes before it all ended for her, Mia stretched out on her air mattress on the floor like Juliet waiting to die for her Romeo and contemplated death and sex. She talked aloud to Bobbie K. who wasn't there. She had Bobbie K. pegged. He was back, but not maudlin, but he was feeling guilty and desperate. Now he was desperate, and she hated having any curiosity.

She talked to the ceiling, “Once upon a time I walked into a trap. All you did is spit on me. I'd hate myself for walking into another trap. I refused to be a beaten dog.”

Bobbie wouldn't have an answer.

He wouldn't know how to respond.

"No more yanky my wankie," she laughed.

Coming back like this? He was barking up the wrong tree.

I cried so much I ran out of tears. And there's more crying to come.

And she was out of booze.

The bar downstairs!

She grabbed four wine glasses as a peace offering.

Goddamn toilet. She had to jiggle the handle before she left.

Downstairs, she said, "I told you I'd return them."

"That's not all of them, is it?"

She brought back a new bottle of *crème de menthe*.

* * * * *

When she got back, she cracked the booze and poured herself a big one. She smiled to herself, a cat ready to pounce on the mouse. Once upon a time Bobbie Kreutznaer was white-hot. But time passes and people get yucky.

Now? His voice now didn't sound like his voice then.

She looked at the red cuts, the crusty scabs, and the pale white scars on her hands and wrists from the poultry department. She regretted not having gone to California.

What stopped her years ago was a husband.

Pierre was a sailor on the Lake Erie iron ore boats.

She met him....?

Where did she meet him?

Back when she had been taking lithium to treat paranoid schizophrenia.

She had had a romantic relationship with that clown named Bradford, whom she met while in drug rehabilitation. He became her accomplice in sex.

Once she panicked, tried to kill him after having sex with him. She had grabbed him round the throat. In her hallucination, she thought...

She had sex with him, expecting he would say *I love you* in gratitude, which she could then parlay into a marriage proposal. But the son of a bitch said thank you and left. Then she found out he left her preggers.

She was packing to go to Californy when she met the man she married. Pierre. He said his last name was Monjoie. He wore a blue blazer and a plaid shirt, a tough man with big dark large glistening eyes and feathery black hair. A friendly man with a soft, unhurried voice, he learned to walk on a boat, and so on land he walked like a sailor. He had no middle name.

He told her, "Pierre Monjoie is French for mountain of joy." She snickered lewdly. "All cock. I called him my Baton Rouge."

They fooled around. He played piano for her in the nude, mostly "pizza parlor" songs from Little Italy in the 1950s.

In bed he never wiggled away so as not to do gas on her.

"This is what it comes to," she whispered to herself, her laughing eyes blinking back tears, but she married him.

Some sailors got lucky. He loved her preppers.

Sometimes the spider tattoo on her chest still itched.

Love may not last forever.

Tattoos do.

He died hard, drunk, accidentally, a single misstep and he became the bumper between the iron ore ship and the long steel dock. Crushed, squashed.

His death broke my heart forever.

She teared up and just as quickly, she fiercely quenched the tears.

"I hate them," she told the kitchen mirror, her eyes maintaining their empty sadness rather than shifting to anger.

Men were as trustworthy as a Swiss bank with Jewish assets. Gutless bunglers they were. She had decided that romance for women made lust from men more redeemable, or permissible, or acceptable, or maybe just palatable.

Men were carnivores of women. After they eat their fill, they wander away, meat drunk, to sleep it off, and then she smirked.

They don't know what an empty stomach is.

Her past had been plenty tough. For a while she was working as a bingo caller. For a while she lived in a huge attic flat above the dry cleaner's.

Mia Sweet had to pawn her furniture to pay for her daughter's gravesite. She never forgot. Never forgave. Carried those names of those who failed to help her engraved on her heart. If they ever fell into quicksand, she would toss them the whole rope. If they had a fiery crash on the freeway, she would pull over and watch them burn to cinders.

Tomorrow she should go visit the cemetery after she got off work.

Yeah, she could visit her dead daughter.

A simple arched stone carved with ivy and a cross.

An only child: "Rest in Peace."

She choked back tears.

They can't hurt you any more, my darling.

She could foresee her ending, too. After a few days fielding complaints about the offensive smells from the small apartment upstairs, the manager of West Hell Saloon would force open the door and find Mia's putrefying body.

The county would cremate her remains and then hold them for several years in storage in case some next of kin would claim them. Since Mia had none, her ashes would be placed in an unmarked mass grave on government property.

Only then could she truly expect to be forgotten.

Rest in peace, for they can't hurt you anymore.

Blessed are the weak, for they shall inherit the grave.

She cried and cried and cried.

Mia Sweet fell asleep on her floor. She slept for five minutes and dreamed again about inter-twisted serpents with darting tongues of flame. In this dream, she was fighting to pull free from the clawing of the Snake Arms, who wanted her to surrender to their vines that entangle.

She always woke, soaked with sweat, her heart ringing a bell.

You got to live in this world, she always told herself.

The toilet was running.

Damn. She had to go jiggle the handle again.

Then: Realizing somebody had been inside her apartment, she caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror: borderline panic. She took a deep breath and steeled herself. I will assert myself with this knife, she thought, hefting it, gauging its weight and balance once again.

Someone had been here.

Someone was here.

Knife in hand, she went after the intruder.

She lived thirty-three seconds more.

END

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By Fred Zackel

THE FRAME MAKER

by

Simon Wood

*Simon Wood is an ex-racing car driver, a licensed pilot and an occasional private investigator. He's had over 150 stories and articles published in a variety of magazine anthologies, such as **Seattle Noir**, **Thriller 2** and **Woman's World**. He is a frequent contributor to *Writer's Digest*. He is the 2007 winner of the Anthony Award, for his story "My Father's Secret", in **Crimespree Magazine**. Simon Wood's novels include **Working Stiffs**, **Accidents Waiting to Happen**, **Paying the Piper** and **We All Fall Down**. As Simon Janus, he is also the author of horror stories, including **The Scrubs** and **Road Rash**. His latest books are **Terminated** and **Asking For Trouble**.*

They'd arranged to meet at Seafront in Sausalito. The restaurant was his choice for no good reason other than he liked the place. He parked on a residential street because he didn't want to have his car remembered by the valets.

He entered the bar and found his client already waiting. Judging by her haggard expression, she'd been there for some time. He waved and smiled to soothe her.

"John Riga?"

It wasn't his real name, but he answered yes.

"Let's get a table, Mrs. Morrison."

The post-lunch, weekday crowd meant no wait and they were shown to a window table with an exquisite view of the bay, even if it was a little overcast. They left business until their meals had been served, something he insisted on. He liked to use small talk to help him get a feel for his client.

Digging into his steamed clams, he asked, "Your lawyer outlined your requirements, but I wonder if you could expand?"

Mrs. Morrison seemed to relish the opportunity to get down to business. People at this stage of the game were usually all fingers and thumbs until things were set in motion. She put her fork down.

"It's my husband."

He nodded understandingly. Spouses accounted for the bulk of his cases. When someone turned betrayer, the betrayed was rarely in a mood to forgive.

“He’s cheating on me.”

“Who with?”

“Jessica Bracken. She’s a family friend.” Mrs. Morrison emitted a bitter laugh. “A college friend, if you can believe that. I know I can’t.”

“How long has this been going on?”

“At least eighteen months.”

“Are you sure you want to go this route?” He gave all his clients an opportunity to back out. He couldn’t afford an attack of conscience halfway through, because when things happened, they happened fast.

“Yes.”

“California is a no fault divorce state, but the courts would look upon you favorably.”

“Not with a prenup. When I signed that, it gave Bill carte blanche to bang who he liked without any fear of reprisals.” She let out the bitter laugh again. “He misjudged that one.”

“Okay, I just wanted to let you know that you have other options.”

Mrs. Morrison forced a smile that looked like it hurt. “I appreciate your kindness, but my mind’s made up. I want this to happen.”

“How do you want this to go down?”

Mrs. Morrison looked puzzled.

“Do you want Jess to die and Bill to take the fall or vice versa?”

“Bill to die. I inherit that way. His estate won’t pay out if he rots in jail.”

“Fine. I’ll need a few things from you.”

“Like what?”

“A list of the places they frequent and when. Also, I’m going to need physical evidence from both of them. Things like hair, jewelry, clothing, or any other personal items. Do you think you can do that?”

“Yes. I’m in and out of Jess’ all the time.” Mrs. Morrison sighed like he’d removed a great weight from her shoulders, which in a way, he had. “How do you want to handle payment?”

He had received five thousand just to sit down with his client. The big money followed. “Twenty-five now. Twenty-five upon on Jess’s arrest. And twenty-five upon her conviction. I take care of all expenses.”

“Cash?”

“Of course. Keep your withdrawals to less than ten thousand. You don’t want the IRS alerted. Does any of that sound like a problem?”

She shook her head.

They made arrangements to meet again when she would have everything ready for him. The check for the meal arrived. He paid cash and left a tip that wouldn’t get him remembered.

* * * * *

Riga met her exactly a week later, this time in San Rafael at a Tully’s coffee shop in a busy strip mall. She’d brought nothing with her, not that she had to. He’d arranged a drop for her. She’d left the twenty-five grand, a bunch of personal items in individual Ziplocs and diaries of Jessica’s and her husband’s movements in an unlocked Honda parked at a Target in El Cerrito. He’d watched the car for an hour before driving it away.

Riga had reviewed the file and had a plan in mind. Today’s meeting was somewhat superfluous, but it was worth crossing some t’s and dotting some i’s. He quizzed her over a grande latté and gave her final instructions, like where to be and where not to be on the fourteenth.

“Is that when it will happen?”

“If your husband’s schedule holds up.”

“I’m sure it will. Shall I contact you if it changes?”

“No. I’ll figure something out.” He stood. “I’ll contact you again when it’s all over.”

He left her and returned to Napa. He spent the rest of the day relaxing, not thinking about Mrs. Morrison or her husband. He placed the payment in his wall safe, packed his bags for the week ahead and went to his storage unit to break out the necessary tools of his trade. He ate a nice meal at his favorite local restaurant before going to bed early. The next morning, he locked up the house, set the security alarm and drove into Corte Madera.

He staked out Jessica Bracken first. She was the fall guy in this saga and he needed to know more about her than the victim, Mr. Morrison. She lived in a large 1970’s ranch house that was no great shakes, but in this community in the shadow of Mount Tamalpais, the place was probably valued in the high six figures. Depending on when she’d purchased it, she was living pretty.

Riga arrived in time to see her leave for work and he followed her Mercedes across the Golden Gate into San Francisco. She worked at UCSF hospital as an oncologist. He parked in the visitors’ parking lot and followed her until she entered the building. He returned to his car to study the file Mrs. Morrison had prepared. She’d done a first class job. He knew plenty about

this woman without doing any real legwork. It was amazing what bitterness could help people accomplish.

He could have used this time to break into Jessica's house, but there was no hurry. Not everything had to be done in a day. He wanted to see if the schedules Mrs. Morrison had provided checked out. There were only a few holes in each of his targets' days. Interestingly, the gaps in Jessica's schedule coincided with the gaps in Mr. Morrison's.

Riga read through the file a couple of times before putting it aside. He sat back with a copy of the Chronicle he'd picked up from the hospital's gift shop. He gave the stories scant attention. He couldn't afford to get too wrapped up in them and miss Jessica leaving. He just wanted to look as though he was reading.

Hours passed with no activity. For most, this would have led to boredom, but not for him. When he was on the job, it was a good day. He loved the niche he'd created for himself, even if it was on the wrong side of the law. He was a lousy cop and a lousier PI, but he was a grand master at framing people. Like all great jobs, he fell into his. His PI business was a rent check from Chapter 11 when a client walked in wanting him to nail his cheating wife. He didn't want dirt on his wife. He wanted someone to die and for her to burn for her cheating ways. He was about to toss his client out when the guy bounced a stack of cash across his desk. The money was untraceable. The guy ran a furniture business and kept a bunch of cash sales hidden from the IRS. He laid it all out the way he wanted it done. Holes in his plan big enough for an eighteen-wheeler to drive through appeared before Riga and then he knew. He knew this was what he was meant to do with his life. The money didn't convince him to do the job. Knowing he could do the job and do it well convinced him. For the first time in his life, the rain cloud that had hung over his head dried up. He set his client's plan straight, making it untouchable. Funny how he lacked this insight as a cop and PI.

He did the job and it went surprisingly well, even for him. He liked to think he had a natural aptitude for the work. The lover died and the furniture man's wife took the fall. Since then, Riga hadn't looked back. His client list had grown and grown thanks to discreet word of mouth. Divorce work, as he jokingly liked to call it, accounted for a fair chunk of his business, but he also did a nice trade in bumping off people's business partners or their competitors. His work had taken him all over the country and overseas. He got to live in his favorite place, the Napa Valley, and only worked five to six weeks of the year. It was a life that couldn't be knocked.

Jessica Bracken emerged at lunchtime and he followed her on foot to a deli. They lunched together, although four tables apart. She finished work at a quarter after six, some fifteen minutes off Mrs. Morrison's timetable. He could live with that margin of error.

The evening rush hour--an oxymoron if Riga had ever heard one, no one rushed anywhere--reduced the commute to a crawl. He felt the effects of a long day weighing heavily on his shoulders. He stuck around Jessica Bracken's home for most of the evening. She seemed to be keeping to her schedule and he called it a day.

The next morning, he arrived early enough to see her leave again. He didn't follow this time. Her schedule would keep her in the city all day. He remained at the wheel until her neighbors left for work, took off with the kids, went to the gym or did whatever these people liked to do with themselves.

When everyone was gone, he approached Jessica's house dressed in a suit, just in case some shut-in was watching him. A suit didn't scream thief like jeans and a windbreaker did. While a man in a suit would get noticed, no one would care to inquire too deeply, fearing they might be getting entangled with a possible Jehovah's Witness or some lower form of salesman.

The entrance to Jessica's house was on the side and a large but groomed juniper obscured any passerby's view of a visitor. There was no need for skeleton keys for this job. Mrs. Morrison had provided him with a door key and the code to the alarm. His entry was flawless.

Jessica kept a tidy, yet uninspiring home. She seemed to be a regular shopper at Pier 1, judging by the furnishings. She possessed a few nice pieces that would have looked good in his home.

Riga went straight into Jessica's master bathroom. He removed hair from the hairbrush and placed it inside a small Ziploc. Next he checked out the jewelry box on her dresser. He took a few of her earrings, but never a matched set. It would have been nice if Jessica owned a gun. Mrs. Morrison didn't believe she did, but he checked anyway. Mrs. Morrison looked to be right. Well, he'd been planning to go the blunt instrument route anyway. He left the house after thirty minutes with more physical evidence to sink Jessica Bracken. He placed the items in an aluminum briefcase in the trunk of his car.

"Now to Mr. Morrison," Riga said to himself, getting behind the wheel.

He pulled out his cell and dialed Morrison's office. "Mr. Morrison, please."

"He's in a meeting," the receptionist answered. "Would you like his voicemail?"

"No. I'll call back later."

Riga hung up and drove out to Tech Pak, in Oakland, the company Morrison had started. They were in the business of designing and manufacturing milk and juice cartons. Who would have thought there was a hundred million a year in supplying cartons? Riga sat in his car and ate a sandwich while he waited for Morrison to leave.

Morrison strolled out to his Lexus at precisely two pm and Riga tailed him to the marina in Tiburon. Jessica was already waiting for him at the locked gates to the marina with a sports duffel over her shoulder. They embraced and walked arm in arm to a yacht named, "All Good Things." They probably thought their tryst was invisible to the world. It never failed to surprise Riga how many people thought they led a surreptitious existence when in fact it was all on show.

By the time Riga had found a parking spot, they'd disappeared below decks. He didn't need a diagram to know what was going on, especially when Morrison emerged topside after half an

hour without a shirt. Morrison stretched and fiddled about on deck before descending below for round two.

The boat accounted for the gaps in Jessica and Morrison's schedules. Riga kept them on a tight leash for the whole week and they never snuck off to a hotel or back to Jessica's place. It was obvious the boat would be the scene of the crime. Hell, they didn't even make it hard for him. Jessica's identity would be all over the place for the crime techs to find. It looked like the fourteenth was a go. Morrison would die next Thursday as planned. It gave Riga plenty of time to get on the boat and set the trap.

Getting to the boat from the mainland was a problem. Security wasn't impregnable, but there were plenty of boat owners around to see him. But that security didn't apply from the water. Boats came and went as they pleased into the marina and no one paid anyone else any mind.

Riga bought a secondhand kayak from some Berkeley student's online ad on craigslist. He put to water under the cover of night, slipped into the marina and glided over to the All Good Things. He moored the kayak off the yacht's anchor line and climbed aboard. The puny locks didn't take him a minute to crack. He pulled all the drapes before switching on his flashlight, then checked out all the berths. The bed in the master suite was wrinkled from use. They hadn't even bothered to clean up after themselves.

He didn't find his blunt instrument, but he found the next best thing in the galley--a butcher knife. He was wondering how he'd get Jessica's prints on the knife when he realized he didn't have to. He'd just do the deed with the knife then plant it at Jessica's. The plan lacked finesse, but it didn't have to be perfect. Jessica was the fall guy. She had to look like a bad criminal and had to be caught. He'd seen enough. He had it all worked out. He locked up the boat and paddled into the night.

Thursday came around swiftly and he looked forward to the kill. It represented the culmination of all his hard work. He was orchestrating the scene for the big climax and his players were arranged. As long as everyone followed their stage directions, everything would go swimmingly.

Thursdays were the adulterers' morning fling. They arrived around eight. Riga paddled into the marina just before dawn and stowed the kayak with a bunch of others. He secreted himself in the covered dingy aboard the yacht and waited for them to arrive. Their routine was simple. Normally, they made the beast with two backs and afterwards, Jessica left first and Morrison left about thirty minutes after her. It was in those thirty minutes that Morrison would die.

They came aboard as scheduled. From his hiding spot, Riga heard noises and felt movement, but it was too distant to make him blush. He heard Jessica make her goodbyes and step off the boat. He gave it a couple of minutes before moving.

Riga was easing back the cover on the dingy when the yacht's diesel engine roared into life. He cursed. This wasn't meant to be happening, but he could adapt. It wasn't the first time he'd been forced to improvise. It still bugged him that he hadn't seen this coming.

Riga peered through the gap between the dingy and its cover. Morrison was at the wheel with his back to him. He maneuvered the All Good Things from its slip, out of the marina and into the bay. Once in the bay, Morrison pointed the yacht in the direction of the ocean. Riga could have taken Morrison there and then, but decided to bide his time. Fate had conspired in his favor. Low clouds had descended over the bay. The Golden Gate's suspension towers peeked above a white blanket. Riga struggled to make out the houses on the shore, which was good. If he couldn't see them, they couldn't see him. He settled back and let Morrison take him wherever he was going.

It was a good forty-five minutes before Morrison cut the engines. The yacht bobbed on the sea. A fishing trip, Riga guessed.

Riga peeled back the dingy cover and saw Morrison descend below decks. He emerged from his hiding place and edged over to the wheel. He removed a pistol from his waistband and flicked off the safety, but he had no intention of using the gun. It was there just in case Morrison got out of hand. He eased back the hatch and descended the steps.

Riga smiled when he saw Morrison on his knees with his back to him. He was in the corridor leading to the berths fiddling with something under a floor hatch. He was making it too easy for Riga. Riga eased the butcher knife from the block in the galley and tiptoed over to Morrison's vulnerable back.

Before he reached Morrison, Morrison stiffened, sensing someone behind him.

"Stay exactly where you are and this will be over in a second."

"How good of you to join the fun, Mr. Riga." Morrison looked over his shoulder. "Or should I say, Mr. Martin Flintoff?"

Morrison knew his name. His real name. His finger tightened on the trigger. "Get up," he ordered and took a step backward. "Nice and slow."

Morrison rose to his feet. He wiped his wet hands down the front of his fleece. "I expect you're wondering how I know who you are?"

"Not interested."

"Oh, but you are. I see it in your face."

Riga's mind whirled with theories. Had Morrison's wife broken down and confessed all? Maybe Morrison employed his own security and they'd picked him out. Various scenarios piled on top of others. All of them were plausible, except for one detail. Morrison knew his real name. That defied explanation.

"Charles Tabor," Morrison said.

The name meant nothing to Riga. “What are you doing--just calling out names for the fun of it?”

Morrison took a step towards Riga. Riga aimed the gun. That stopped Morrison. Riga hoped he hadn’t noticed the faint tremor in his hand.

“The name means nothing to you?” Morrison leaned against a bulkhead and stuffed his hands in the pockets of his baggy cargo pants.

“Should it?”

“Yes. You killed the man five years ago.”

Riga picked through the Rolodex in his head. He searched for the name but came up short.

“Charles worked for Guidex, a sizeable government contractor. They supplied guidance software to the missile industry. There was a bug in the software and if the government found out, the company would be ruined. Charles wanted to go public, but his business partners didn’t. They hired you to kill him. Any of this sinking in?”

Riga nodded. He’d killed Tabor at his cabin in West Virginia. He’d shot him with a deer rifle and had set up Tabor’s wife to carry the can. It had worked, or so he thought.

“Charles was my friend. And Lucy Tabor was Jessica’s sister. Surely you noticed the resemblance between them or do you never look beyond the paycheck?”

In truth, he didn’t remember Lucy Tabor.

“Lucy always claimed she hadn’t done it and we believed her. Investigators have been working for me for years. We got our break when the Guidex scandal broke despite them hiring you. One of the directors let something slip and that put us on to you. I’ll give you credit, you’ve been immensely hard to track down. You hid your identity well.”

But not well enough, Riga thought. “I assume your wife is in on this.”

Morrison nodded.

“You all played your roles very well.”

“Thank you.” Morrison gave a little bow. “I must admit we thought you’d catch on.”

He should’ve, but he hadn’t. How had he missed the signs? How had he screwed this job up so badly? Complacency? It didn’t matter. Too late to cry about it now.

“So why the charade?” Riga gestured to the yacht.

Morrison smiled. “We wanted you to feel what it’s like when the shoe is on the other foot. How’s it feel?”

Riga should have felt anger or rage for being screwed this way, but these emotions were absent. If he felt anything, it was disappointment. Disappointment at being caught out, especially

in this fashion. He was sure Morrison wanted to see him bouncing off the walls like a caged animal. Riga wouldn't give him the satisfaction.

"How do you think?"

A grin formed on Morrison's face. "That bad, huh?"

A wet chill seeped into Riga's feet. He glanced down. Water bubbled up from the floor hatch. Fear gripped him.

"What have you done?"

"Scuttled us. I've tossed the keys overboard, destroyed the radio and opened the cocks. We're sinking." Morrison smiled. "We won't be making it back to shore."

"You might not." Riga backed towards the topside doorway. He looked away for a second and from the corner of his eye, he caught Morrison fumbling for something in his pocket. He fired just as Morrison jerked out a flare gun and fired it. Riga's bullet hit Morrison high in the chest, cutting the legs from under the CEO. Morrison's flaming ball of incandescence scorched across the cabin. Riga, half blinded by the flare's brightness, hit the wet floor. The flare struck something and ignited. Riga looked up to see the dingy on fire. There was no escape now.

He raced over to Morrison's prone form. Morrison's back was saturated in water and his chest was saturated in blood. Riga dropped to his knees and jammed the gun against Morrison's cheek.

"Why have you killed us?" he demanded.

"I'm dead already."

"What are you talking about?"

"Jessica, what does she do for a living?"

"She's an oncologist."

"Yes. She was my doctor as well as a family friend. I have only months to live with a miserable end ahead of me." The yacht lurched against the impact of a wave, the hull heavy and unresponsive with so much water inside it. "This seemed a much more productive ending. I can't lie to you. I didn't relish drowning, but you've taken that fear away from me."

"You son of bitch." Riga released Morrison in disgust and backed away from him. "I'm not finished yet."

"Oh, yes you are," Morrison called out. "Tell me, did my research prove right in one respect-- that you can't swim?"

"Yes."

Riga turned his back on Morrison and rushed topside hoping to see a passing ship, but all he saw was a faint hand sketch of the coastline on the horizon and it was getting fainter by the second.

END

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McTEAGUE

Part Seven

by

FRANK NORRIS

Classic Noir

*Frank Norris was a naturalistic writer of the very late nineteenth century, who produced some of the darkest, hardest-edged prose of his day. **McTeague** is, perhaps, his best-known work, if only because it was the foundation for the infamous Erich von Stroheim silent film **Greed**. Largely inspired by the novels of Emile Zola and the scientific work of Charles Darwin, much of Norris's literary work focused on the efforts of ordinary men to conquer - or at least control - the raging beast within. **McTeague**, the story of an ill-fated love triangle in nineteenth century San Francisco, is still considered to be one of the great American classics, ranking up there with the works of Theodore Dreiser and William Faulkner. How great an author Norris might have become in the fullness of time we will never know, as he died in 1902, just three years after publishing **McTeague**, at the very young age of thirty-two.*

*The **Back Alley** will serialize **McTeague** over seven issues, and will include articles by scholars who focus on the work of Frank Norris to help the reader understand and appreciate this very early example of naturalistically noir fiction.*

The Story So Far:

***McTeague**, a hulking, slow-witted former car-boy in a silver mine, has opened a sham dentist parlor on Polk Street in late nineteenth century San Francisco. Schooled only by observing an itinerant dental butcher, and some superficial readings of 'Allen's Practical Dentist' books, he engages mostly in pulling teeth and administering gas (most likely ether or nitrous oxide). His best friend, budding socialist Marcus Schouler, introduces him to a distant cousin, Trina Sieppe. Trina has a broken tooth which needs mending. While Trina is waiting to have the tooth fixed, **McTeague**'s housekeeper Maria Macapa sells her a lottery ticket. **McTeague** determines that Trina's tooth can't be saved, and he has to pull it and the one next to it and fashion replacements for them. It's an operation that takes a couple of weeks and several visits to complete. At a final session, he is forced to place her under anesthesia with gas. While she is asleep, **McTeague** is seized by an impulse that he fights mightily, but unsuccessfully. Yielding to what he calls his 'brute', **McTeague** kisses Trina forcefully. Ashamed, he returns to his work, and when Trina awakens she tells him that she 'never felt a thing'. **McTeague**, perhaps out of guilt, immediately- if somewhat roughly- proposes marriage to Trina. She becomes very upset, refuses his proposal, and begins to vomit.*

*As it happens, Marcus Schouler is also in love with Trina, a fact which **McTeague** knew even as he kissed her and asked her to marry him. As he lies in his dental parlor, guilt-ridden, he isn't aware that Maria Macapa is robbing him blind, taking instruments and dental gold foil to sell to a Jewish pawnbroker named Zerkow.*

***McTeague** joins with Marcus one afternoon, while Marcus - who works as an assistant for Grannis, the dog doctor - is walking some of Grannis' 'patients'. Over a couple of beers, Marcus asks **McTeague** what is bothering him. After considerable persuasion, **McTeague** confesses that he loves Trina Sieppe. Marcus realizes that **McTeague** would marry Trina that very afternoon if she would have*

him, but Marcus does not think that he himself cares for her that much. He tells McTeague that he will 'pull out', and make way for McTeague to court Trina, in the interest of their friendship. McTeague is overcome with emotion.

To cheer his friend up, Marcus plays a trick on him. He demonstrates how he can put an entire billiards ball in his mouth. McTeague is dumbstruck. Marcus takes the ball out, and then challenges McTeague to do the same thing. He does, but the ball becomes stuck. McTeague begins to panic, until the ball comes loose of its own accord. Laughing over the joke, Marcus suggests that McTeague begin his courtship of Trina as soon as possible. In a piece of foreshadowing, Marcus points to two dogs snarling at each other through a picket fence and says, "By damn they don't love each other. Just listen; wouldn't that make a fight if the two got together? Have to try it some day."

Having received his friend's blessing, McTeague begins to court Trina. Because her family is from the Old World, all his dates with her are taken as family outings – picnics at the bay, family suppers at her home, and a memorable trip to Schuetzen Park across the bay. After that trip, he begins to see her every Sunday and Wednesday, and one day she meets him at the train without her family. They take a walk, and McTeague confesses to Trina his deepest desire – to have a large gilded tooth mounted outside his dental parlor to announce to one and all his profession.

Once again McTeague asks Trina to marry him, and he kisses her. Alarmed, she takes off and returns to her home, where she asks her mother what she should do. Trina can't decide whether to marry McTeague – on the one hand she finds herself aroused by him, but she is also frightened by his size and rare outbursts of temper. She realized at last that McTeague had awakened the Woman in her, and that she was, for better or worse, irrevocably bonded to him.

Marcus suggests to McTeague that he take Trina to the theater – something that would be a completely novel experience for both of them. McTeague takes Trina and her family to the theater in San Francisco. Never having seen a vaudeville show before, McTeague is amazed at all the different acts, and only leaves reluctantly when Trina's young brother August wets the pants of his new Lord Fauntleroy suit.

Upon returning to McTeague's dental parlors, where McTeague intends to treat the family to dinner, they are called down by Maria Macapa, who excitedly proclaims that Trina's lottery ticket had the winning number, and that she has won five thousand dollars! Everyone is excited, except for Marcus Schouler, who realizes that by giving Trina up to save his friendship with McTeague, he has also given up any chance of sharing in his cousin's amazing new wealth.

"You fool, you fool, Marcus Schouler! (he exclaims) If you'd kept Trina you'd have had that money. You might have had it yourself. You've thrown away your chance in life -- to give up the girl, yes -- but this," he stamped his foot with rage -- "to throw five thousand dollars out of the window -- to stuff it into the pockets of someone else, when it might have been yours, when you might have had Trina AND the money -- and all for what? Because we were pals . Oh, 'pals' is all right -- but five thousand dollars -- to have played it right into his hands -- God DAMN the luck!"

Over the next two months, Trina and McTeague prepare for their impending wedding. McTeague has big plans for the five thousand dollars Trina won in the lottery—a new house, lavish furnishings, feasts—but it soon becomes evident that Trina is frugal, and satisfied with a small monthly dividend from investing the money. She finally invests in her Uncle Oelbermann's toy store in the Mission District, at an interest rate of six percent.

Marcus Schouler, in the mean time, has grown more and more resentful about losing his chance at Trina's money. He picks arguments with McTeague, claiming that the dentist owes him money, and then refusing it when McTeague offers to pay him back. McTeague is distressed and puzzled over what he might have done to insult his dear friend. Finally, during one particularly vehement argument in a bar, Marcus demands part of the five thousand dollars as a reward for bringing McTeague and Trina together. When McTeague refuses, Marcus breaks McTeague's pipe, and throws a knife at him.

Trina has a surprise for McTeague, however. She brings him a present one day—a huge gilded tooth to go over the door of his dentist studios, the very tooth he had dreamed of placing there.

On the eve of the wedding, Trina's mother brings McTeague and Marcus together in her home and demands that they reconcile. They do so, and become friends again. Trina is still upset at Marcus for demanding part of the money, and declares, "It's mine! All mine!" She immediately relents, however, and amends her declaration by saying, "That is, it's ours."

McTeague and Trina are married, and Marcus makes quite a show of congratulating Trina on her nuptials. However, when it comes time for Trina's family to return to Oakland, she panics, and tells her mother that she is afraid. Her mother attempts to comfort her, and then the family leaves her alone with McTeague. When he attempts to embrace her, she panics again, and can only tell him that she is frightened by the sheer size and power of him. He professes his love for her again, and she yields willingly to him.

As she embraces him, she says, "You must be good to me -- very, very good to me, dear -- for you're all that I have in the world now."

It doesn't take long for problems to arise in McTeague's and Trina's marriage, and—as is often the case—their troubles tend to revolve around money. Trina has a large nest egg of over five thousand dollars, but also seems very reluctant to spend any of it. Fearful of losing her money, she has become miserly. McTeague finds a house they can rent, for thirty-five dollars a month plus water, but Trina says that they can't afford it, despite the fact that McTeague's dentist parlors are flourishing. McTeague signs a contract for the house anyway, which infuriates Trina. They have a terrible argument. Later, regretting her part in it, she decides to give McTeague ten dollars. However, when she pulls out her money from her bedroom chest, she finds rationalizations not to part with a single coin.

McTeague recovers quickly from the conflict, and suggests that they go to Scheutzen Park for another picnic. The picnic turns into a multi-family affair, and even Marcus Schouler comes along. The men decide to engage in a wrestling contest. When all the preliminary matches are completed, the only two men left to wrestle for the win are McTeague and Marcus. They wrestle, and McTeague thinks he has pinned Marcus. As he celebrates, Marcus—who prides himself on his wrestling ability and is enraged that the simple giant dentist might have bettered him, protests that it was not a legitimate pin, and that McTeague must give him a second chance. The other men agree, and McTeague and Marcus wrestle a second time. This time, Marcus bites of the lobe of McTeague's ear. McTeague, whose brutish nature lies just under his placid, good-natured surface, loses control and becomes furious, intending to kill Marcus. The other men and Trina try to intervene, as McTeague grasps Marcus's arm and snaps it like a twig. Finally, Trina is able to reach McTeague by appealing to his medical expertise, asking him how to stop the bleeding from his damaged ear.

The picnic breaks into two groups—one working on setting Marcus's broken arm, and the other watching Trina attending to McTeague's bleeding ear.

All at once, Trina's cousin Selina begins to giggle hysterically, and cries out with a peal of laughter: "Oh, what a way for our picnic to end!"

Zerkow repeatedly pressures Maria Macapa to tell him about the gold dishes she had once bragged about owning, but she claims to know nothing about them. Finally, exasperated, he beats her and tries to threaten her into telling him where the dishes are located. She runs to Marcus Schouler, begging for protection. Zerkow threatens Marcus with a knife, but Marcus bullies him into standing down. Maria cries that she has no idea what dishes Zerkow wants. Trina, however, reminds her that she used to brag about the dishes all the time. Maria continues to plead ignorance, and Marcus just laughs at her and tells her to come to him if she is in trouble.

Trina, over the course of several weeks, demonstrates an increasing level of anxiety over her sweepstakes money and the \$25 a month in interest that it generates. First, her mother writes from Oakland to tell her that she is in a bad way, and to request that Trina send her fifty dollars to tide her over. McTeague urges her to send the money, and Trina—after a considerable argument—agrees to send \$25 one month, and another \$25 the next. When McTeague later inquires as to whether she sent the money, she says that she did, when in reality she didn't. Then, word reaches her that Marcus Schouler is planning to leave San Francisco. When he shows up at the McTeague home to say goodbye, Trina presumes that he will ask for money to live on while establishing himself, and vows that she will not give him a dime. Marcus, however, only wishes to tell them goodbye, and that he will likely never return to San Francisco, as he is headed for southern California to begin a ranch with an 'English duck' as a co-investor.

McTeague receives a letter from City Hall, ordering him to quit practicing dentistry, as he never went to dental college, and has no license to practice. Trina is immediately gripped with terror of poverty or—worse—that she and McTeague might be sent to prison should he keep practicing. McTeague initially ignores the order, but then another, more strident order arrives, and Trina collapses into despondency. McTeague suggests that they can live on her sweepstakes winnings until he can straighten out his affairs, but she resolutely refuses. She says that this is HER money, and his loss of his practice means that they will lose their home and perhaps go to prison.

He closes his dental parlors, and they move to a one-room apartment in a boarding house. McTeague insists that they can live on some of the two hundred dollars Trina has saved, but Trina insists that she only has seventy-five, and they must live on the \$25 monthly interest on her sweepstakes money, and the thirty dollars that her Uncle Oelbermann gives them. What she doesn't tell him is that she has actually saved three-hundred dollars, but she doesn't want to part with a penny of it.

They sell all their possessions from their house, except for McTeague's concertina and their caged canary, which he insists on keeping. Another dentist does drop by to offer ten dollars for the gilded tooth sign outside McTeague's parlors, but McTeague refuses to part with it.

Trina takes a job whittling toy Noah's Ark animals, and McTeague finds low-paying work fashioning dental tools. They fight constantly over the spending of dimes and quarters. After several months, however, McTeague is fired due to 'hard times'. Trina demands all the money he has on hand, and sends him out to apply at other surgical tools companies for work. He asks for car fare, since it looks like rain, but Trina refuses, and tells him it won't rain.

The leather worker Frennis sees McTeague walking in the rain and invites him in. They drink whiskey together, ostensibly to warm McTeague up, and all this does is fuel McTeague's anger toward Trina and her miserly nature. He returns home, furious, and demands his severance pay back. She lies to him, telling him that she used it to pay the grocer. He again says that they could dip into her five thousand dollars sweepstakes money to get out of the 'rat hole' in which they live. She now

becomes furious herself, and says that now that McTeague is unemployed they will not even be able to afford the 'rat hole', and that they will need to find even more meager lodgings. McTeague tells her to leave him alone, and he goes to bed.

Trina wonders, however, where McTeague got money for whiskey—not knowing that he was treated by Mr. Frennis. She wonders whether he has some hidden cache of funds, and decides she will have to keep an eye out for it.

Life becomes more entropic for all the major characters. McTeague begins to drink heavily, and often demands money from Trina, which she consistently refuses him. Zerkow murders Maria Macapa by slitting her throat. Trina begins to have nightmares, in which she imagines Maria to be staring at her. Trina decides to rent Maria Macapa's pitiful rooms, because it's all she and McTeague can afford. Trina's health begins to fade with her beauty, and she becomes dumpy and her hair becomes ratty and dry.

Finally, McTeague can hold off the brute no longer, and he steals what remains of Trina's money from the strongbox in their rooms, and disappears. Despite the fact that Trina had placed the majority of the sweepstakes winnings in Mr.

Olbermann's bank, when she discovers what he has done, she rends her clothes and scratches at her skin before falling ill.

When she is found by Old Mrs. Baker, the neighbor calls the doctor. In the course of his examination, he finds that her fingers—which she had used to paint the Noah's Ark animals with 'non-poisonous' paint—have become severely infected with blood poisoning, and they have to be amputated to save her hand and her life. Trina is left with only one option to make her living. She becomes a scrubwoman, spending her days on hands and knees dragging a soapy brush across wooden floors.

Bit by bit, and then finally in one huge sum, Trina withdraws all of her sweepstakes money from Uncle Oelbermann's bank, and keeps the masses of twenty-dollar pieces in a trunk in her bedroom. While she doesn't spend a penny, she does revel in having the money, and at night she strips naked and frolics in the coins and sleeps with them in her bed.

Three months after disappearing, McTeague returns and begs Trina to let him into the rooms. She refuses him, and he argues with her. The next day, McTeague visits Uncle Oelbermann. Oelbermann tells McTeague that Trina has withdrawn all of the sweepstakes money.

McTeague takes a job as a 'handler' at the music store, delivering pianos. He becomes more surly and his hatred of Trina grows by the day. He drinks more and more. Finally, near Christmas, he decides to take the money from Trina. He enters her rooms, and they have a terrible fight, McTeague demanding the money all the time. He throttles Trina, allowing the full force of his inner brute to take control of him. Then he grabs the money and runs into the night.

Sometime before morning, Trina dies of her injuries.

Knowing that he has probably killed her, McTeague flees for the only refuge he can think of—the mines which he escaped so many years before.

Chapter 20

The day was very hot, and the silence of high noon lay close and thick between the steep slopes of the canyons like an invisible, muffling fluid. At intervals the drone of an insect bored the air and trailed slowly to silence again. Everywhere were pungent, aromatic smells. The vast, moveless heat seemed to distil countless odors from the brush -- odors of warm sap, of pine needles, and of tar-weed, and above all the medicinal odor of witch hazel. As far as one could

look, uncounted multitudes of trees and manzanita bushes were quietly and motionlessly growing, growing, growing. A tremendous, immeasurable Life pushed steadily heavenward without a sound, without a motion. At turns of the road, on the higher points, canyons disclosed themselves far away, gigantic grooves in the landscape, deep blue in the distance, opening one into another, ocean-deep, silent, huge, and suggestive of colossal primeval forces held in reserve. At their bottoms they were solid, massive; on their crests they broke delicately into fine serrated edges where the pines and redwoods outlined their million of tops against the high white horizon. Here and there the lifted themselves out of the narrow river beds in groups like giant lions rearing their heads after drinking. The entire region was untamed. In some places east of the Mississippi nature is cosy, intimate, small, and homelike, like a good-natured housewife. In Placer County, California, she is a vast, unconquered brute of the Pliocene epoch, savage, sullen, and magnificently indifferent to man.

But there were men in these mountains, like lice on mammoths' hides, fighting them stubbornly, now with hydraulic "monitors," now with drill and dynamite, boring into the vitals of them, or tearing away great yellow gravelly scars in the flanks of them, sucking their blood, extracting gold.

Here and there at long distances upon the canyon sides rose the headgear of a mine, surrounded with its few unpainted houses, and topped by its never-failing feather of black smoke. On near approach one heard the prolonged thunder of the stamp-mill, the crusher, the insatiable monster, gnashing the rocks to powder with its long iron teeth, vomiting them out again in a thin stream of wet gray mud. Its enormous maw, fed night and day with the car-boys' loads, gorged itself with gravel, and spat out the gold, grinding the rocks between its jaws, glutted, as it were, with the very entrails of the earth, and growling over its endless meal, like some savage animal, some legendary dragon, some fabulous beast, symbol of inordinate and monstrous gluttony.

McTeague had left the Overland train at Colfax, and the same afternoon had ridden some eight miles across the mountains in the stage that connects Colfax with Iowa Hill. Iowa Hill was a small one-street town, the headquarters of the mines of the district. Originally it had been built upon the summit of a mountain, but the sides of this mountain have long since been "hydraulicked" away, so that the town now clings to a mere back bone, and the rear windows of the houses on both sides of the street look down over sheer precipices, into vast pits hundreds of feet deep.

The dentist stayed over night at the Hill, and the next morning started off on foot farther into the mountains. He still wore his blue overalls and jumper; his woollen cap was pulled down over his eye; on his feet were hob-nailed boots he had bought at the store in Colfax; his blanket roll was over his back; in his left hand swung the bird cage wrapped in sacks.

Just outside the town he paused, as if suddenly remembering something.

"There ought to be a trail just off the road here," he muttered. "There used to be a trail -- a short cut."

The next instant, without moving from his position, he saw where it opened just before him. His instinct had halted him at the exact spot. The trail zigzagged down the abrupt descent of the canyon, debouching into a gravelly river bed.

"Indian River," muttered the dentist. "I remember -- I remember. I ought to hear the Morning Star's stamps from here." He cocked his head. A low, sustained roar, like a distant cataract, came to his ears from across the river. "That's right," he said, contentedly. He crossed the river and regained the road beyond. The slope rose under his feet; a little farther on he passed the Morning Star mine, smoking and thundering. McTeague pushed steadily on. The road rose with the rise of the mountain, turned at a sharp angle where a great live-oak grew, and held level for nearly a quarter of a mile. Twice again the dentist left the road and took to the trail that cut through deserted hydraulic pits. He knew exactly where to look for these trails; not once did his instinct deceive him. He recognized familiar points at once. Here was Cold Canyon, where invariably, winter and summer, a chilly wind was blowing; here was where the road to Spencer's branched off; here was Bussy's old place, where at one time there were so many dogs; here was Delmue's cabin, where unlicensed whiskey used to be sold; here was the plank bridge with its one rotten board; and here the flat overgrown with manzanita, where he once had shot three quail.

At noon, after he had been tramping for some two hours, he halted at a point where the road dipped suddenly. A little to the right of him, and flanking the road, an enormous yellow gravel-pit like an emptied lake gaped to heaven. Farther on, in the distance, a canyon zigzagged toward the horizon, rugged with pine-clad mountain crests. Nearer at hand, and directly in the line of the road, was an irregular cluster of unpainted cabins. A dull, prolonged roar vibrated in the air. McTeague nodded his head as if satisfied.

"That's the place," he muttered.

He reshouldered his blanket roll and descended the road. At last he halted again. He stood before a low one-story building, differing from the others in that it was painted. A verandah, shut in with mosquito netting, surrounded it. McTeague dropped his blanket roll on a lumber pile outside, and came up and knocked at the open door. Some one called to him to come in.

McTeague entered, rolling his eyes about him, noting the changes that had been made since he had last seen this place. A partition had been knocked down, making one big room out of the two former small ones. A counter and railing stood inside the door. There was a telephone on the wall. In one corner he also observed a stack of surveyor's instruments; a big drawing-board straddled on spindle legs across one end of the room, a mechanical drawing of some kind, no doubt the plan of the mine, unrolled upon it; a chromo representing a couple of peasants in a ploughed field (Millet's "Angelus") was nailed unframed upon the wall, and hanging from the same wire nail that secured one of its corners in place was a bullion bag and a cartridge belt with a loaded revolver in the pouch.

The dentist approached the counter and leaned his elbows upon it. Three men were in the room -- a tall, lean young man, with a thick head of hair surprisingly gray, who was playing with a half-grown great Dane puppy; another fellow about as young, but with a jaw almost as salient

as McTeague's, stood at the letter-press taking a copy of a letter; a third man, a little older than the other two, was pottering over a transit. This latter was massively built, and wore overalls and low boots streaked and stained and spotted in every direction with gray mud. The dentist looked slowly from one to the other; then at length, "Is the foreman about?" he asked.

The man in the muddy overalls came forward.

"What you want?"

He spoke with a strong German accent.

The old invariable formula came back to McTeague on the instant.

"What's the show for a job?"

At once the German foreman became preoccupied, looking aimlessly out of the window. There was a silence.

"You hev been miner alretty?"

"Yes, yes."

"Know how to hendle pick'n shov'le?"

"Yes, I know."

The other seemed unsatisfied. "Are you a 'cousin Jack'?"

The dentist grinned. This prejudice against Cornishmen he remembered too.

"No. American."

"How long sence you mine?"

"Oh, year or two."

"Show your hends." McTeague exhibited his hard, callused palms.

"When ken you go to work? I want a chuck-tender on der night-shift."

"I can tend a chuck. I'll go on to-night."

"What's your name?"

The dentist started. He had forgotten to be prepared for this.

"Huh? What?"

"What's the name?"

McTeague's eye was caught by a railroad calendar hanging over the desk. There was no time to think.

"Burlington," he said, loudly.

The German took a card from a file and wrote it down.

"Give dis card to der boarding-boss, down at der boarding-haus, den gome find me bei der mill at sex o'clock, und I set you to work."

Straight as a homing pigeon, and following a blind and unreasoned instinct, McTeague had returned to the Big Dipper mine.

* * * * *

Within a week's time it seemed to him as though he had never been away. He picked up his life again exactly where he had left it the day when his mother had sent him away with the travelling dentist, the charlatan who had set up his tent by the bunk house. The house McTeague had once lived in was still there, occupied by one of the shift bosses and his family. The dentist passed it on his way to and from the mine.

He himself slept in the bunk house with some thirty others of his shift. At half-past five in the evening the cook at the boarding-house sounded a prolonged alarm upon a crowbar bent in the form of a triangle, that hung upon the porch of the boarding-house. McTeague rose and dressed, and with his shift had supper. Their lunch-pails were distributed to them. Then he made his way to the tunnel mouth, climbed into a car in the waiting ore train, and was hauled into the mine.

Once inside, the hot evening air turned to a cool dampness, and the forest odors gave place to the smell of stale dynamite smoke, suggestive of burning rubber. A cloud of steam came from McTeague's mouth; underneath, the water swashed and rippled around the car-wheels, while the light from the miner's candlesticks threw wavering blurs of pale yellow over the gray rotting quartz of the roof and walls. Occasionally McTeague bent down his head to avoid the lagging of the roof or the projections of an overhanging shute. From car to car all along the line the miners called to one another as the train trundled along, joshing and laughing.

A mile from the entrance the train reached the breast where McTeague's gang worked. The men clambered from the cars and took up the labor where the day shift had left it, burrowing their way steadily through a primeval river bed.

The candlesticks thrust into the crevices of the gravel strata lit up faintly the half dozen moving figures befouled with sweat and with wet gray mould. The picks struck into the loose

gravel with a yielding shock. The long-handled shovels clinked amidst the piles of bowlders and scraped dully in the heaps of rotten quartz. The Burly drill boring for blasts broke out from time to time in an irregular chug-chug, chug-chug, while the engine that pumped the water from the mine coughed and strangled at short intervals.

McTeague tended the chuck. In a way he was the assistant of the man who worked the Burly. It was his duty to replace the drills in the Burly, putting in longer ones as the hole got deeper and deeper. From time to time he rapped the drill with a pole-pick when it stuck fast or fitchered.

Once it even occurred to him that there was a resemblance between his present work and the profession he had been forced to abandon. In the Burly drill he saw a queer counterpart of his old-time dental engine; and what were the drills and chucks but enormous hoe excavators, hard bits, and burrs? It was the same work he had so often performed in his "Parlors," only magnified, made monstrous, distorted, and grotesqued, the caricature of dentistry.

He passed his nights thus in the midst of the play of crude and simple forces -- the powerful attacks of the Burly drills; the great exertions of bared, bent backs overlaid with muscle; the brusque, resistless expansion of dynamite; and the silent, vast, Titanic force, mysterious and slow, that cracked the timbers supporting the roof of the tunnel, and that gradually flattened the lagging till it was thin as paper.

The life pleased the dentist beyond words. The still, colossal mountains took him back again like a returning prodigal, and vaguely, without knowing why, he yielded to their influence -- their immensity, their enormous power, crude and blind, reflecting themselves in his own nature, huge, strong, brutal in its simplicity. And this, though he only saw the mountains at night. They appeared far different then than in the daytime. At twelve o'clock he came out of the mine and lunched on the contents of his dinner-pail, sitting upon the embankment of the track, eating with both hands, and looking around him with a steady ox-like gaze. The mountains rose sheer from every side, heaving their gigantic crests far up into the night, the black peaks crowding together, and looking now less like beasts than like a company of cowed giants.

* * * * *

In the daytime they were silent; but at night they seemed to stir and rouse themselves. Occasionally the stamp-mill stopped, its thunder ceasing abruptly. Then one could hear the noises that the mountains made in their living. From the canyon, from the crowding crests, from the whole immense landscape, there rose a steady and prolonged sound, coming from all sides at once. It was that incessant and muffled roar which disengages itself from all vast bodies, from oceans, from cities, from forests, from sleeping armies, and which is like the breathing of an infinitely great monster, alive, palpitating.

McTeague returned to his work. At six in the morning his shift was taken off, and he went out of the mine and back to the bunk house. All day long he slept, flung at length upon the strong-smelling blankets -- slept the dreamless sleep of exhaustion, crushed and overpowered

with the work, flat and prone upon his belly, till again in the evening the cook sounded the alarm upon the crowbar bent into a triangle.

Every alternate week the shifts were changed. The second week McTeague's shift worked in the daytime and slept at night. Wednesday night of this second week the dentist woke suddenly. He sat up in his bed in the bunk house, looking about him from side to side; an alarm clock hanging on the wall, over a lantern, marked half-past three.

"What was it?" muttered the dentist. "I wonder what it was." The rest of the shift were sleeping soundly, filling the room with the rasping sound of snoring. Everything was in its accustomed place; nothing stirred. But for all that McTeague got up and lit his miner's candlestick and went carefully about the room, throwing the light into the dark corners, peering under all the beds, including his own. Then he went to the door and stepped outside. The night was warm and still; the moon, very low, and canted on her side like a galleon foundering. The camp was very quiet; nobody was in sight. "I wonder what it was," muttered the dentist. "There was something -- why did I wake up? Huh?" He made a circuit about the bunk house, unusually alert, his small eyes twinkling rapidly, seeing everything. All was quiet. An old dog who invariably slept on the steps of the bunk house had not even wakened. McTeague went back to bed, but did not sleep.

"There was SOMETHING," he muttered, looking in a puzzled way at his canary in the cage that hung from the wall at his bedside; "something. What was it? There is something NOW. There it is again -- the same thing." He sat up in bed with eyes and ears strained. "What is it? I don't know what it is. I don't hear anything, an' I don't see anything. I feel something -- right now; feel it now. I wonder -- I don't know -- I don't know."

Once more he got up, and this time dressed himself. He made a complete tour of the camp, looking and listening, for what he did not know. He even went to the outskirts of the camp and for nearly half an hour watched the road that led into the camp from the direction of Iowa Hill. He saw nothing; not even a rabbit stirred. He went to bed.

But from this time on there was a change. The dentist grew restless, uneasy. Suspicion of something, he could not say what, annoyed him incessantly. He went wide around sharp corners. At every moment he looked sharply over his shoulder. He even went to bed with his clothes and cap on, and at every hour during the night would get up and prowl about the bunk house, one ear turned down the wind, his eyes gimleting the darkness. From time to time he would murmur:

"There's something. What is it? I wonder what it is."

What strange sixth sense stirred in McTeague at this time? What animal cunning, what brute instinct clamored for recognition and obedience? What lower faculty was it that roused his suspicion, that drove him out into the night a score of times between dark and dawn, his head in the air, his eyes and ears keenly alert?

One night as he stood on the steps of the bunk house, peering into the shadows of the camp, he uttered an exclamation as of a man suddenly enlightened. He turned back into the house, drew

from under his bed the blanket roll in which he kept his money hid, and took the canary down from the wall. He strode to the door and disappeared into the night. When the sheriff of Placer County and the two deputies from San Francisco reached the Big Dipper mine, McTeague had been gone two days.

Chapter 21

"Well," said one of the deputies, as he backed the horse into the shafts of the buggy in which the pursuers had driven over from the Hill, "we've about as good as got him. It isn't hard to follow a man who carries a bird cage with him wherever he goes."

McTeague crossed the mountains on foot the Friday and Saturday of that week, going over through Emigrant Gap, following the line of the Overland railroad. He reached Reno Monday night. By degrees a vague plan of action outlined itself in the dentist's mind.

"Mexico," he muttered to himself. "Mexico, that's the place. They'll watch the coast and they'll watch the Eastern trains, but they won't think of Mexico."

The sense of pursuit which had harassed him during the last week of his stay at the Big Dipper mine had worn off, and he believed himself to be very cunning.

"I'm pretty far ahead now, I guess," he said. At Reno he boarded a south-bound freight on the line of the Carson and Colorado railroad, paying for a passage in the caboose. "Freights don't run on schedule time," he muttered, "and a conductor on a passenger train makes it his business to study faces. I'll stay with this train as far as it goes."

The freight worked slowly southward, through western Nevada, the country becoming hourly more and more desolate and abandoned. After leaving Walker Lake the sage-brush country began, and the freight rolled heavily over tracks that threw off visible layers of heat. At times it stopped whole half days on sidings or by water tanks, and the engineer and fireman came back to the caboose and played poker with the conductor and train crew. The dentist sat apart, behind the stove, smoking pipe after pipe of cheap tobacco. Sometimes he joined in the poker games. He had learned poker when a boy at the mine, and after a few deals his knowledge returned to him; but for the most part he was taciturn and unsociable, and rarely spoke to the others unless spoken to first. The crew recognized the type, and the impression gained ground among them that he had "done for" a livery-stable keeper at Truckee and was trying to get down into Arizona.

McTeague heard two brakemen discussing him one night as they stood outside by the halted train. "The livery-stable keeper called him a bastard; that's what Picachos told me," one of them remarked, "and started to draw his gun; an' this fellar did for him with a hayfork. He's a horse doctor, this chap is, and the livery-stable keeper had got the law on him so's he couldn't practise any more, an' he was sore about it."

Near a place called Queen's the train reentered California, and McTeague observed with relief that the line of track which had hitherto held westward curved sharply to the south again. The train was unmolested; occasionally the crew fought with a gang of tramps who attempted to ride the brake beams, and once in the northern part of Inyo County, while they were halted at a water tank, an immense Indian buck, blanketed to the ground, approached McTeague as he stood on the roadbed stretching his legs, and without a word presented to him a filthy, crumpled letter. The letter was to the effect that the buck Big Jim was a good Indian and deserving of charity; the signature was illegible. The dentist stared at the letter, returned it to the buck, and regained the train just as it started. Neither had spoken; the buck did not move from his position, and fully five minutes afterward, when the slow-moving freight was miles away, the dentist looked back and saw him still standing motionless between the rails, a forlorn and solitary point of red, lost in the immensity of the surrounding white blur of the desert.

At length the mountains began again, rising up on either side of the track; vast, naked hills of white sand and red rock, spotted with blue shadows. Here and there a patch of green was spread like a gay table-cloth over the sand. All at once Mount Whitney leaped over the horizon. Independence was reached and passed; the freight, nearly emptied by now, and much shortened, rolled along the shores of Owen Lake. At a place called Keeler it stopped definitely. It was the terminus of the road.

The town of Keeler was a one-street town, not unlike Iowa Hill -- the post-office, the bar and hotel, the Odd Fellows' Hall, and the livery stable being the principal buildings.

"Where to now?" muttered McTeague to himself as he sat on the edge of the bed in his room in the hotel. He hung the canary in the window, filled its little bathtub, and watched it take its bath with enormous satisfaction. "Where to now?" he muttered again. "This is as far as the railroad goes, an' it won' do for me to stay in a town yet a while; no, it won' do. I got to clear out. Where to? That's the word, where to? I'll go down to supper now" -- He went on whispering his thoughts aloud, so that they would take more concrete shape in his mind -- "I'll go down to supper now, an' then I'll hang aroun' the bar this evening till I get the lay of this land. Maybe this is fruit country, though it looks more like a cattle country. Maybe it's a mining country. If it's a mining country," he continued, puckering his heavy eyebrows, "if it's a mining country, an' the mines are far enough off the roads, maybe I'd better get to the mines an' lay quiet for a month before I try to get any farther south."

He washed the cinders and dust of a week's railroading from his face and hair, put on a fresh pair of boots, and went down to supper. The dining-room was of the invariable type of the smaller interior towns of California. There was but one table, covered with oilcloth; rows of benches answered for chairs; a railroad map, a chromo with a gilt frame protected by mosquito netting, hung on the walls, together with a yellowed photograph of the proprietor in Masonic regalia. Two waitresses whom the guests -- all men -- called by their first names, came and went with large trays.

Through the windows outside McTeague observed a great number of saddle horses tied to trees and fences. Each one of these horses had a riata on the pommel of the saddle. He sat down to the table, eating his thick hot soup, watching his neighbors covertly, listening to everything

that was said. It did not take him long to gather that the country to the east and south of Keeler was a cattle country.

Not far off, across a range of hills, was the Panamint Valley, where the big cattle ranges were. Every now and then this name was tossed to and fro across the table in the flow of conversation -- "Over in the Panamint." "Just going down for a rodeo in the Panamint." "Panamint brands." "Has a range down in the Panamint." Then by and by the remark, "Hoh, yes, Gold Gulch, they're down to good pay there. That's on the other side of the Panamint Range. Peters came in yesterday and told me."

McTeague turned to the speaker.

"Is that a gravel mine?" he asked.

"No, no, quartz."

"I'm a miner; that's why I asked."

"Well I've mined some too. I had a hole in the ground meself, but she was silver; and when the skunks at Washington lowered the price of silver, where was I? Fitchered, b'God!"

"I was looking for a job."

"Well, it's mostly cattle down here in the Panamint, but since the strike over at Gold Gulch some of the boys have gone prospecting. There's gold in them damn Panamint Mountains. If you can find a good long 'contact' of country rocks you ain't far from it. There's a couple of fellars from Redlands has located four claims around Gold Gulch. They got a vein eighteen inches wide, an' Peters says you can trace it for more'n a thousand feet. Were you thinking of prospecting over there?"

"Well, well, I don' know, I don' know."

"Well, I'm going over to the other side of the range day after t'morrow after some ponies of mine, an' I'm going to have a look around. You say you've been a miner?"

"Yes, yes."

"If you're going over that way, you might come along and see if we can't find a contact, or copper sulphurets, or something. Even if we don't find color we may find silver-bearing galena." Then, after a pause, "Let's see, I didn't catch your name."

"Huh? My name's Carter," answered McTeague, promptly. Why he should change his name again the dentist could not say. "Carter" came to his mind at once, and he answered without reflecting that he had registered as "Burlington" when he had arrived at the hotel.

"Well, my name's Cribbens," answered the other. The two shook hands solemnly.

"You're about finished?" continued Cribbens, pushing back. "Le's go out in the bar an' have a drink on it."

"Sure, sure," said the dentist.

The two sat up late that night in a corner of the barroom discussing the probability of finding gold in the Panamint hills. It soon became evident that they held differing theories. McTeague clung to the old prospector's idea that there was no way of telling where gold was until you actually saw it. Cribbens had evidently read a good many books upon the subject, and had already prospected in something of a scientific manner.

"Shucks!" he exclaimed. "Gi' me a long distinct contact between sedimentary and igneous rocks, an' I'll sink a shaft without ever SEEING 'color.'"

The dentist put his huge chin in the air. "Gold is where you find it," he returned, doggedly.

"Well, it's my idea as how pardners ought to work along different lines," said Cribbens. He tucked the corners of his mustache into his mouth and sucked the tobacco juice from them. For a moment he was thoughtful, then he blew out his mustache abruptly, and exclaimed:

"Say, Carter, le's make a go of this. You got a little cash I suppose -- fifty dollars or so?"

"Huh ? Yes -- I -- I -- "

"Well, I got about fifty. We'll go pardners on the proposition, an' we'll dally 'round the range yonder an' see what we can see. What do you say?"

"Sure, sure," answered the dentist.

"Well, it's a go then, hey?"

"That's the word."

"Well, le's have a drink on it."

They drank with profound gravity.

They fitted out the next day at the general merchandise store of Keeler -- picks, shovels, prospectors' hammers, a couple of cradles, pans, bacon, flour, coffee, and the like, and they bought a burro on which to pack their kit.

"Say, by jingo, you ain't got a horse," suddenly exclaimed Cribbens as they came out of the store. "You can't get around this country without a pony of some kind."

Cribbens already owned and rode a buckskin cayuse that had to be knocked in the head and stunned before it could be saddled. "I got an extry saddle an' a headstall at the hotel that you can use," he said, "but you'll have to get a horse."

In the end the dentist bought a mule at the livery stable for forty dollars. It turned out to be a good bargain, however, for the mule was a good traveller and seemed actually to fatten on sage-brush and potato parings. When the actual transaction took place, McTeague had been obliged to get the money to pay for the mule out of the canvas sack. Cribbens was with him at the time, and as the dentist unrolled his blankets and disclosed the sack, whistled in amazement.

"An' me asking you if you had fifty dollars!" he exclaimed. "You carry your mine right around with you, don't you?"

"Huh, I guess so," muttered the dentist. "I -- I just sold a claim I had up in El Dorado County," he added.

* * * * *

At five o'clock on a magnificent May morning the "pardners" jogged out of Keeler, driving the burro before them. Cribbens rode his cayuse, McTeague following in his rear on the mule.

"Say," remarked Cribbens, "why in thunder don't you leave that fool canary behind at the hotel? It's going to be in your way all the time, an' it will sure die. Better break its neck an' chuck it."

"No, no," insisted the dentist. "I've had it too long. I'll take it with me."

"Well, that's the craziest idea I ever heard of," remarked Cribbens, "to take a canary along prospecting. Why not kid gloves, and be done with it?"

They travelled leisurely to the southeast during the day, following a well-beaten cattle road, and that evening camped on a spur of some hills at the head of the Panamint Valley where there was a spring. The next day they crossed the Panamint itself.

"That's a smart looking valley," observed the dentist.

"NOW you're talking straight talk," returned Cribbens, sucking his mustache. The valley was beautiful, wide, level, and very green. Everywhere were herds of cattle, scarcely less wild than deer. Once or twice cowboys passed them on the road, big-boned fellows, picturesque in their broad hats, hairy trousers, jingling spurs, and revolver belts, surprisingly like the pictures McTeague remembered to have seen. Everyone of them knew Cribbens, and almost invariably joshed him on his venture.

"Say, Crib, ye'd best take a wagon train with ye to bring your dust back."

Cribbens resented their humor, and after they had passed, chewed fiercely on his mustache.

"I'd like to make a strike, b'God! if it was only to get the laugh on them joshers."

By noon they were climbing the eastern slope of the Panamint Range. Long since they had abandoned the road; vegetation ceased; not a tree was in sight. They followed faint cattle trails that led from one water hole to another. By degrees these water holes grew dryer and dryer, and at three o'clock Cribbens halted and filled their canteens.

"There ain't any TOO much water on the other side," he observed grimly.

"It's pretty hot," muttered the dentist, wiping his streaming forehead with the back of his hand.

"Huh!" snorted the other more grimly than ever. The motionless air was like the mouth of a furnace. Cribbens's pony lathered and panted. McTeague's mule began to droop his long ears. Only the little burro plodded resolutely on, picking the trail where McTeague could see but trackless sand and stunted sage. Towards evening Cribbens, who was in the lead, drew rein on the summit of the hills.

Behind them was the beautiful green Panamint Valley, but before and below them for miles and miles, as far as the eye could reach, a flat, white desert, empty even of sage-brush, unrolled toward the horizon. In the immediate foreground a broken system of arroyos, and little canyons tumbled down to meet it. To the north faint blue hills shouldered themselves above the horizon.

"Well," observed Cribbens, "we're on the top of the Panamint Range now. It's along this eastern slope, right below us here, that we're going to prospect. Gold Gulch" -- he pointed with the butt of his quirt -- "is about eighteen or nineteen miles along here to the north of us. Those hills way over yonder to the northeast are the Telescope hills."

"What do you call the desert out yonder?" McTeague's eyes wandered over the illimitable stretch of alkali that stretched out forever and forever to the east, to the north, and to the south.

"That," said Cribbens, "that's Death Valley."

There was a long pause. The horses panted irregularly, the sweat dripping from their heaving bellies. Cribbens and the dentist sat motionless in their saddles, looking out over that abominable desolation, silent, troubled.

"God!" ejaculated Cribbens at length, under his breath, with a shake of his head. Then he seemed to rouse himself. "Well," he remarked, "first thing we got to do now is to find water."

This was a long and difficult task. They descended into one little canyon after another, followed the course of numberless arroyos, and even dug where there seemed indications of moisture, all to no purpose. But at length McTeague's mule put his nose in the air and blew once or twice through his nostrils.

"Smells it, the son of a gun!" exclaimed Cribbens. The dentist let the animal have his head, and in a few minutes he had brought them to the bed of a tiny canyon where a thin stream of brackish water filtered over a ledge of rocks.

"We'll camp here," observed Cribbens, "but we can't turn the horses loose. We'll have to picket 'em with the lariats. I saw some loco-weed back here a piece, and if they get to eating that, they'll sure go plum crazy. The burro won't eat it, but I wouldn't trust the others."

A new life began for McTeague. After breakfast the "pardners" separated, going in opposite directions along the slope of the range, examining rocks, picking and chipping at ledges and boulders, looking for signs, prospecting. McTeague went up into the little canyons where the streams had cut through the bed rock, searching for veins of quartz, breaking out this quartz when he had found it, pulverizing and panning it. Cribbens hunted for "contacts," closely examining country rocks and out-crops, continually on the lookout for spots where sedimentary and igneous rock came together.

One day, after a week of prospecting, they met unexpectedly on the slope of an arroyo. It was late in the afternoon. "Hello, pardner," exclaimed Cribbens as he came down to where McTeague was bending over his pan. "What luck?"

The dentist emptied his pan and straightened up. "Nothing, nothing. You struck anything?"

"Not a trace. Guess we might as well be moving towards camp." They returned together, Cribbens telling the dentist of a group of antelope he had seen.

"We might lay off to-morrow, an' see if we can plug a couple of them fellers. Antelope steak would go pretty well after beans an' bacon an' coffee week in an' week out."

McTeague was answering, when Cribbens interrupted him with an exclamation of profound disgust. "I thought we were the first to prospect along in here, an' now look at that. Don't it make you sick?"

He pointed out evidences of an abandoned prospector's camp just before them -- charred ashes, empty tin cans, one or two gold-miner's pans, and a broken pick. "Don't that make you sick?" muttered Cribbens, sucking his mustache furiously. "To think of us mushheads going over ground that's been covered already! Say, pardner, we'll dig out of here to-morrow. I've been thinking, anyhow, we'd better move to the south; that water of ours is pretty low."

"Yes, yes, I guess so," assented the dentist. "There ain't any gold here."

"Yes, there is," protested Cribbens doggedly; "there's gold all through these hills, if we could only strike it. I tell you what, pardner, I got a place in mind where I'll bet no one ain't prospected -- least not very many. There don't very many care to try an' get to it. It's over on the other side of Death Valley. It's called Gold Mountain, an' there's only one mine been located there, an' it's paying like a nitrate bed. There ain't many people in that country, because it's all hell to get into. First place, you got to cross Death Valley and strike the Armagosa Range fur off

to the south. Well, no one ain't stuck on crossing the Valley, not if they can help it. But we could work down the Panamint some hundred or so miles, maybe two hundred, an' fetch around by the Armagosa River, way to the south'erd. We could prospect on the way. But I guess the Armagosa'd be dried up at this season. Anyhow," he concluded, "we'll move camp to the south to-morrow. We got to get new feed an' water for the horses. We'll see if we can knock over a couple of antelope to-morrow, and then we'll scoot."

"I ain't got a gun," said the dentist; "not even a revolver. I -- "

"Wait a second," said Cribbens, pausing in his scramble down the side of one of the smaller gulches. "Here's some slate here; I ain't seen no slate around here yet. Let's see where it goes to."

McTeague followed him along the side of the gulch. Cribbens went on ahead, muttering to himself from time to time:

"Runs right along here, even enough, and here's water too. Didn't know this stream was here; pretty near dry, though. Here's the slate again. See where it runs, pardner?"

"Look at it up there ahead," said McTeague. "It runs right up over the back of this hill."

"That's right," assented Cribbens. "Hi!" he shouted suddenly, "HERE'S A 'CONTACT,' and here it is again, and there, and yonder. Oh, look at it, will you? That's granodiorite on slate. Couldn't want it any more distinct than that. GOD! if we could only find the quartz between the two now."

"Well, there it is," exclaimed McTeague. "Look on ahead there; ain't that quartz?"

"You're shouting right out loud," vociferated Cribbens, looking where McTeague was pointing. His face went suddenly pale. He turned to the dentist, his eyes wide.

"By God, pardner," he exclaimed, breathlessly. "By God -- " he broke off abruptly.

"That's what you been looking for, ain't it?" asked the dentist.

"LOOKING for! LOOKING for!" Cribbens checked himself. "That's SLATE all right, and that's granodiorite, I know" -- he bent down and examined the rock -- "and here's the quartz between 'em; there can't be no mistake about that. Gi' me that hammer," he cried, excitedly. "Come on, git to work. Jab into the quartz with your pick; git out some chunks of it." Cribbens went down on his hands and knees, attacking the quartz vein furiously. The dentist followed his example, swinging his pick with enormous force, splintering the rocks at every stroke. Cribbens was talking to himself in his excitement.

"Got you THIS time, you son of a gun! By God! I guess we got you THIS time, at last. Looks like it, anyhow. GET a move on, pardner. There ain't anybody 'round, is there? Hey?" Without looking, he drew his revolver and threw it to the dentist. "Take the gun an' look around, pardner. If you see any son of a gun ANYWHERE, PLUG him. This yere's OUR claim. I guess

we got it THIS tide, pardner. Come on." He gathered up the chunks of quartz he had broken out, and put them in his hat and started towards their camp. The two went along with great strides, hurrying as fast as they could over the uneven ground.

"I don' know," exclaimed Cribbens, breathlessly, "I don' want to say too much. Maybe we're fooled. Lord, that damn camp's a long ways off. Oh, I ain't goin' to fool along this way. Come on, pardner." He broke into a run. McTeague followed at a lumbering gallop. Over the scorched, parched ground, stumbling and tripping over sage-brush and sharp-pointed rocks, under the palpitating heat of the desert sun, they ran and scrambled, carrying the quartz lumps in their hats.

"See any 'COLOR' in it, pardner?" gasped Cribbens. "I can't, can you? 'Twouldn't be visible nohow, I guess. Hurry up. Lord, we ain't ever going to get to that camp."

Finally they arrived. Cribbens dumped the quartz fragments into a pan.

"You pestle her, pardner, an' I'll fix the scales." McTeague ground the lumps to fine dust in the iron mortar while Cribbens set up the tiny scales and got out the "spoons" from their outfit.

"That's fine enough," Cribbens exclaimed, impatiently. "Now we'll spoon her. Gi' me the water."

Cribbens scooped up a spoonful of the fine white powder and began to spoon it carefully. The two were on their hands and knees upon the ground, their heads close together, still panting with excitement and the exertion of their run.

"Can't do it," exclaimed Cribbens, sitting back on his heels, "hand shakes so. YOU take it, pardner. Careful, now."

McTeague took the horn spoon and began rocking it gently in his huge fingers, sluicing the water over the edge a little at a time, each movement washing away a little more of the powdered quartz. The two watched it with the intensest eagerness.

"Don't see it yet; don't see it yet," whispered Cribbens, chewing his mustache. "LEETLE faster, pardner. That's the ticket. Careful, steady, now; leetle more, leetle more. Don't see color yet, do you?"

The quartz sediment dwindled by degrees as McTeague spooned it steadily. Then at last a thin streak of a foreign substance began to show just along the edge. It was yellow.

Neither spoke. Cribbens dug his nails into the sand, and ground his mustache between his teeth. The yellow streak broadened as the quartz sediment washed away. Cribbens whispered:

"We got it, pardner. That's gold."

McTeague washed the last of the white quartz dust away, and let the water trickle after it. A pinch of gold, fine as flour, was left in the bottom of the spoon.

"There you are," he said. The two looked at each other. Then Cribbens rose into the air with a great leap and a yell that could have been heard for half a mile.

"Yee-e-ow! We GOT it, we struck it. Pardner, we got it. Out of sight. We're millionaires." He snatched up his revolver and fired it with inconceivable rapidity. "PUT it there, old man," he shouted, gripping McTeague's palm.

"That's gold, all right," muttered McTeague, studying the contents of the spoon.

"You bet your great-grandma's Cochin-China Chessy cat it's gold," shouted Cribbens. "Here, now, we got a lot to do. We got to stake her out an' put up the location notice. We'll take our full acreage, you bet. You -- we haven't weighed this yet. Where's the scales?" He weighed the pinch of gold with shaking hands. "Two grains," he cried. "That'll run five dollars to the ton. Rich, it's rich; it's the richest kind of pay, pardner. We're millionaires. Why don't you say something? Why don't you get excited? Why don't you run around an' do something?"

"Huh!" said McTeague, rolling his eyes. "Huh! I know, I know, we've struck it pretty rich."

"Come on," exclaimed Cribbens, jumping up again. "We'll stake her out an' put up the location notice. Lord, suppose anyone should have come on her while we've been away." He reloaded his revolver deliberately. "We'll drop HIM all right, if there's anyone fooling round there; I'll tell you those right now. Bring the rifle, pardner, an' if you see anyone, PLUG him, an' ask him what he wants afterward."

They hurried back to where they had made their discovery.

"To think," exclaimed Cribbens, as he drove the first stake, "to think those other mushheads had their camp within gunshot of her and never located her. Guess they didn't know the meaning of a 'contact.' Oh, I knew I was solid on 'contacts.'"

They staked out their claim, and Cribbens put up the notice of location. It was dark before they were through. Cribbens broke off some more chunks of quarts in the vein.

"I'll spoon this too, just for the fun of it, when I get home," he explained, as they tramped back to the camp.

"Well," said the dentist, "we got the laugh on those cowboys."

"Have we?" shouted Cribbens. "HAVE we? Just wait and see the rush for this place when we tell 'em about it down in Keeler. Say, what'll we call her?"

"I don' know, I don' know."

"We might call her the 'Last Chance.' 'Twas our last chance, wasn't it? We'd 'a' gone antelope shooting tomorrow, and the next day we'd 'a' -- say, what you stopping for?" he added, interrupting himself. "What's up?"

The dentist had paused abruptly on the crest of a canyon. Cribbens, looking back, saw him standing motionless in his tracks.

"What's up?" asked Cribbens a second time.

McTeague slowly turned his head and looked over one shoulder, then over the other. Suddenly he wheeled sharply about, cocking the Winchester and tossing it to his shoulder. Cribbens ran back to his side, whipping out his revolver.

"What is it?" he cried. "See anybody?" He peered on ahead through the gathering twilight.

"No, no."

"Hear anything?"

"No, didn't hear anything."

"What is it then? What's up?"

"I don' know, I don' know," muttered the dentist, lowering the rifle. "There was something."

"What?"

"Something -- didn't you notice?"

"Notice what?"

"I don' know. Something -- something or other."

"Who? What? Notice what? What did you see?"

The dentist let down the hammer of the rifle.

"I guess it wasn't anything," he said rather foolishly.

"What d'you think you saw -- anybody on the claim?"

"I didn't see anything. I didn't hear anything either. I had an idea, that's all; came all of a sudden, like that. Something, I don' know what."

"I guess you just imagined something. There ain't anybody within twenty miles of us, I guess."

"Yes, I guess so, just imagined it, that's the word."

Half an hour later they had the fire going. McTeague was frying strips of bacon over the coals, and Cribbens was still chattering and exclaiming over their great strike. All at once McTeague put down the frying-pan.

"What's that?" he growled.

"Hey? What's what?" exclaimed Cribbens, getting up.

"Didn't you notice something?"

"Where?"

"Off there." The dentist made a vague gesture toward the eastern horizon. "Didn't you hear something -- I mean see something -- I mean -- "

"What's the matter with you, pardner?"

"Nothing. I guess I just imagined it."

But it was not imagination. Until midnight the partners lay broad awake, rolled in their blankets under the open sky, talking and discussing and making plans. At last Cribbens rolled over on his side and slept. The dentist could not sleep.

What! It was warning him again, that strange sixth sense, that obscure brute instinct. It was aroused again and clamoring to be obeyed. Here, in these desolate barren hills, twenty miles from the nearest human being, it stirred and woke and rowelled him to be moving on. It had goaded him to flight from the Big Dipper mine, and he had obeyed. But now it was different; now he had suddenly become rich; he had lighted on a treasure -- a treasure far more valuable than the Big Dipper mine itself. How was he to leave that? He could not move on now. He turned about in his blankets. No, he would not move on. Perhaps it was his fancy, after all. He saw nothing, heard nothing. The emptiness of primeval desolation stretched from him leagues and leagues upon either hand. The gigantic silence of the night lay close over everything, like a muffling Titanic palm. Of what was he suspicious? In that treeless waste an object could be seen at half a day's journey distant. In that vast silence the click of a pebble was as audible as a pistol-shot. And yet there was nothing, nothing.

The dentist settled himself in his blankets and tried to sleep. In five minutes he was sitting up, staring into the blue-gray shimmer of the moonlight, straining his ears, watching and listening intently. Nothing was in sight. The browned and broken flanks of the Panamint hills lay quiet and familiar under the moon. The burro moved its head with a clinking of its bell; and McTeague's mule, dozing on three legs, changed its weight to another foot, with a long breath. Everything fell silent again.

"What is it?" muttered the dentist. "If I could only see something, hear something."

He threw off the blankets, and, rising, climbed to the summit of the nearest hill and looked back in the direction in which he and Cribbens had travelled a fortnight before. For half an hour he waited, watching and listening in vain. But as he returned to camp, and prepared to roll his blankets about him, the strange impulse rose in him again abruptly, never so strong, never so insistent. It seemed as though he were bitted and ridden; as if some unseen hand were turning him toward the east; some unseen heel spurring him to precipitate and instant flight.

Flight from what? "No," he muttered under his breath. "Go now and leave the claim, and leave a fortune! What a fool I'd be, when I can't see anything or hear anything. To leave a fortune! No, I won't. No, by God!" He drew Cribbens's Winchester toward him and slipped a cartridge into the magazine.

"No," he growled. "Whatever happens, I'm going to stay. If anybody comes -- " He depressed the lever of the rifle, and sent the cartridge clashing into the breech.

"I ain't going to sleep," he muttered under his mustache. "I can't sleep; I'll watch." He rose a second time, clambered to the nearest hilltop and sat down, drawing the blanket around him, and laying the Winchester across his knees. The hours passed. The dentist sat on the hilltop a motionless, crouching figure, inky black against the pale blur of the sky. By and by the edge of the eastern horizon began to grow blacker and more distinct in out-line. The dawn was coming. Once more McTeague felt the mysterious intuition of approaching danger; an unseen hand seemed reining his head eastward; a spur was in his flanks that seemed to urge him to hurry, hurry, hurry. The influence grew stronger with every moment. The dentist set his great jaws together and held his ground.

"No," he growled between his set teeth. "No, I'll stay." He made a long circuit around the camp, even going as far as the first stake of the new claim, his Winchester cocked, his ears pricked, his eyes alert. There was nothing; yet as plainly as though it were shouted at the very nape of his neck he felt an enemy. It was not fear. McTeague was not afraid.

"If I could only SEE something -- somebody," he muttered, as he held the cocked rifle ready, "I -- I'd show him."

He returned to camp. Cribbens was snoring. The burro had come down to the stream for its morning drink. The mule was awake and browsing. McTeague stood irresolutely by the cold ashes of the camp-fire, looking from side to side with all the suspicion and wariness of a tracked stag. Stronger and stronger grew the strange impulse. It seemed to him that on the next instant he MUST perforce wheel sharply eastward and rush away headlong in a clumsy, lumbering gallop. He fought against it with all the ferocious obstinacy of his simple brute nature.

"Go, and leave the mine? Go and leave a million dollars? No, NO, I won't go. No, I'll stay. Ah," he exclaimed, under his breath, with a shake of his huge head, like an exasperated and harassed brute, "ah, show yourself, will you?" He brought the rifle to his shoulder and covered point after point along the range of hills to the west. "Come on, show yourself. Come on a little, all of you. I ain't afraid of you; but don't skulk this way. You ain't going to drive me away from my mine. I'm going to stay."

An hour passed. Then two. The stars winked out, and the dawn whitened. The air became warmer. The whole east, clean of clouds, flamed opalescent from horizon to zenith, crimson at the base, where the earth blackened against it; at the top fading from pink to pale yellow, to green, to light blue, to the turquoise iridescence of the desert sky. The long, thin shadows of the early hours drew backward like receding serpents, then suddenly the sun looked over the shoulder of the world, and it was day.

At that moment McTeague was already eight miles away from the camp, going steadily eastward. He was descending the lowest spurs of the Panamint hills, following an old and faint cattle trail. Before him he drove his mule, laden with blankets, provisions for six days, Cribben's rifle, and a canteen full of water. Securely bound to the pommel of the saddle was the canvas sack with its precious five thousand dollars, all in twenty-dollar gold pieces. But strange enough in that horrid waste of sand and sage was the object that McTeague himself persistently carried -- the canary in its cage, about which he had carefully wrapped a couple of old flour-bags.

At about five o'clock that morning McTeague had crossed several trails which seemed to be converging, and, guessing that they led to a water hole, had followed one of them and had brought up at a sort of small sundried sink which nevertheless contained a little water at the bottom. He had watered the mule here, refilled the canteen, and drank deep himself. He had also dampened the old flour-sacks around the bird cage to protect the little canary as far as possible from the heat that he knew would increase now with every hour. He had made ready to go forward again, but had paused irresolute again, hesitating for the last time.

"I'm a fool," he growled, scowling back at the range behind him. "I'm a fool. What's the matter with me? I'm just walking right away from a million dollars. I know it's there. No, by God!" he exclaimed, savagely, "I ain't going to do it. I'm going back. I can't leave a mine like that." He had wheeled the mule about, and had started to return on his tracks, grinding his teeth fiercely, inclining his head forward as though butting against a wind that would beat him back. "Go on, go on," he cried, sometimes addressing the mule, sometimes himself. "Go on, go back, go back. I WILL go back." It was as though he were climbing a hill that grew steeper with every stride. The strange impelling instinct fought his advance yard by yard. By degrees the dentist's steps grew slower; he stopped, went forward again cautiously, almost feeling his way, like someone approaching a pit in the darkness. He stopped again, hesitating, gnashing his teeth, clinching his fists with blind fury. Suddenly he turned the mule about, and once more set his face to the eastward.

"I can't," he cried aloud to the desert; "I can't, I can't. It's stronger than I am. I CAN'T go back. Hurry now, hurry, hurry, hurry."

He hastened on furtively, his head and shoulders bent. At times one could almost say he crouched as he pushed forward with long strides; now and then he even looked over his shoulder. Sweat rolled from him, he lost his hat, and the matted mane of thick yellow hair swept over his forehead and shaded his small, twinkling eyes. At times, with a vague, nearly automatic gesture, he reached his hand forward, the fingers prehensile, and directed towards the horizon, as if he would clutch it and draw it nearer; and at intervals he muttered, "Hurry, hurry, hurry on, hurry on." For now at last McTeague was afraid.

His plans were uncertain. He remembered what Cribbens had said about the Armagosa Mountains in the country on the other side of Death Valley. It was all hell to get into that country, Cribbens had said, and not many men went there, because of the terrible valley of alkali that barred the way, a horrible vast sink of white sand and salt below even the sea level, the dry bed, no doubt, of some prehistoric lake. But McTeague resolved to make a circuit of the valley, keeping to the south, until he should strike the Armagosa River. He would make a circuit of the valley and come up on the other side. He would get into that country around Gold Mountain in the Armagosa hills, barred off from the world by the leagues of the red-hot alkali of Death Valley. "They" would hardly reach him there. He would stay at Gold Mountain two or three months, and then work his way down into Mexico.

McTeague tramped steadily forward, still descending the lower irregularities of the Panamint Range. By nine o'clock the slope flattened out abruptly; the hills were behind him; before him, to the east, all was level. He had reached the region where even the sand and sage-brush begin to dwindle, giving place to white, powdered alkali. The trails were numerous, but old and faint; and they had been made by cattle, not by men. They led in all directions but one -- north, south, and west; but not one, however faint, struck out towards the valley.

"If I keep along the edge of the hills where these trails are," muttered the dentist, "I ought to find water up in the arroyos from time to time."

At once he uttered an exclamation. The mule had begun to squeal and lash out with alternate hoofs, his eyes rolling, his ears flattened. He ran a few steps, halted, and squealed again. Then, suddenly wheeling at right angles, set off on a jog trot to the north, squealing and kicking from time to time. McTeague ran after him shouting and swearing, but for a long time the mule would not allow himself to be caught. He seemed more bewildered than frightened.

"He's eatun some of that loco-weed that Cribbens spoke about," panted McTeague. "Whoa, there; steady, you." At length the mule stopped of his own accord, and seemed to come to his senses again. McTeague came up and took the bridle rein, speaking to him and rubbing his nose.

"There, there, what's the matter with you?" The mule was docile again. McTeague washed his mouth and set forward once more.

The day was magnificent. From horizon to horizon was one vast span of blue, whitening as it dipped earthward. Miles upon miles to the east and southeast the desert unrolled itself, white, naked, inhospitable, palpitating and shimmering under the sun, unbroken by so much as a rock or cactus stump. In the distance it assumed all manner of faint colors, pink, purple, and pale orange. To the west rose the Panamint Range, sparsely sprinkled with gray sage-brush; here the earths and sands were yellow, ochre, and rich, deep red, the hollows and canyons picked out with intense blue shadows. It seemed strange that such barrenness could exhibit this radiance of color, but nothing could have been more beautiful than the deep red of the higher bluffs and ridges, seamed with purple shadows, standing sharply out against the pale-blue whiteness of the horizon.

By nine o'clock the sun stood high in the sky. The heat was intense; the atmosphere was thick and heavy with it. McTeague gasped for breath and wiped the beads of perspiration from

his forehead, his cheeks, and his neck. Every inch and pore of his skin was tingling and pricking under the merciless lash of the sun's rays.

"If it gets much hotter," he muttered, with a long breath, "if it gets much hotter, I -- I don' know -- " He wagged his head and wiped the sweat from his eyelids, where it was running like tears.

The sun rose higher; hour by hour, as the dentist tramped steadily on, the heat increased. The baked dry sand crackled into innumerable tiny flakes under his feet. The twigs of the sagebrush snapped like brittle pipestems as he pushed through them. It grew hotter. At eleven the earth was like the surface of a furnace; the air, as McTeague breathed it in, was hot to his lips and the roof of his mouth. The sun was a disk of molten brass swimming in the burnt-out blue of the sky. McTeague stripped off his woollen shirt, and even unbuttoned his flannel undershirt, tying a handkerchief loosely about his neck.

"Lord!" he exclaimed. "I never knew it COULD get as hot as this."

The heat grew steadily fiercer; all distant objects were visibly shimmering and palpitating under it. At noon a mirage appeared on the hills to the northwest. McTeague halted the mule, and drank from the tepid water in the canteen, dampening the sack around the canary's cage. As soon as he ceased his tramp and the noise of his crunching, grinding footsteps died away, the silence, vast, illimitable, enfolded him like an immeasurable tide. From all that gigantic landscape, that colossal reach of baking sand, there arose not a single sound. Not a twig rattled, not an insect hummed, not a bird or beast invaded that huge solitude with call or cry. Everything as far as the eye could reach, to north, to south, to east, and west, lay inert, absolutely quiet and moveless under the remorseless scourge of the noon sun. The very shadows shrank away, hiding under sage-bushes, retreating to the farthest nooks and crevices in the canyons of the hills. All the world was one gigantic blinding glare, silent, motionless. "If it gets much hotter," murmured the dentist again, moving his head from side to side, "if it gets much hotter, I don' know what I'll do."

Steadily the heat increased. At three o'clock it was even more terrible than it had been at noon.

"Ain't it EVER going to let up?" groaned the dentist, rolling his eyes at the sky of hot blue brass. Then, as he spoke, the stillness was abruptly stabbed through and through by a shrill sound that seemed to come from all sides at once. It ceased; then, as McTeague took another forward step, began again with the suddenness of a blow, shriller, nearer at hand, a hideous, prolonged note that brought both man and mule to an instant halt.

"I know what THAT is," exclaimed the dentist. His eyes searched the ground swiftly until he saw what he expected he should see -- the round thick coil, the slowly waving clover-shaped head and erect whirring tail with its vibrant rattles.

For fully thirty seconds the man and snake remained looking into each other's eyes. Then the snake uncoiled and swiftly wound from sight amidst the sagebrush. McTeague drew breath again, and his eyes once more beheld the illimitable leagues of quivering sand and alkali.

"Good Lord! What a country!" he exclaimed. But his voice was trembling as he urged forward the mule once more.

Fiercer and fiercer grew the heat as the afternoon advanced. At four McTeague stopped again. He was dripping at every pore, but there was no relief in perspiration. The very touch of his clothes upon his body was unendurable. The mule's ears were drooping and his tongue lolled from his mouth. The cattle trails seemed to be drawing together toward a common point; perhaps a water hole was near by.

"I'll have to lay up, sure," muttered the dentist. "I ain't made to travel in such heat as this."

He drove the mule up into one of the larger canyons and halted in the shadow of a pile of red rock. After a long search he found water, a few quarts, warm and brackish, at the bottom of a hollow of sunwracked mud; it was little more than enough to water the mule and refill his canteen. Here he camped, easing the mule of the saddle, and turning him loose to find what nourishment he might. A few hours later the sun set in a cloudless glory of red and gold, and the heat became by degrees less intolerable. McTeague cooked his supper, chiefly coffee and bacon, and watched the twilight come on, revelling in the delicious coolness of the evening. As he spread his blankets on the ground he resolved that hereafter he would travel only at night, laying up in the daytime in the shade of the canyons. He was exhausted with his terrible day's march. Never in his life had sleep seemed so sweet to him.

But suddenly he was broad awake, his jaded senses all alert.

"What was that?" he muttered. "I thought I heard something -- saw something."

He rose to his feet, reaching for the Winchester. Desolation lay still around him. There was not a sound but his own breathing; on the face of the desert not a grain of sand was in motion. McTeague looked furtively and quickly from side to side, his teeth set, his eyes rolling. Once more the rowl was in his flanks, once more an unseen hand reined him toward the east. After all the miles of that dreadful day's flight he was no better off than when he started. If anything, he was worse, for never had that mysterious instinct in him been more insistent than now; never had the impulse toward precipitate flight been stronger; never had the spur bit deeper. Every nerve of his body cried aloud for rest; yet every instinct seemed aroused and alive, goading him to hurry on, to hurry on.

"What IS it, then? What is it?" he cried, between his teeth. "Can't I ever get rid of you? Ain't I EVER going to shake you off? Don' keep it up this way. Show yourselves. Let's have it out right away. Come on. I ain't afraid if you'll only come on; but don't skulk this way." Suddenly he cried aloud in a frenzy of exasperation, "Damn you, come on, will you? Come on and have it out." His rifle was at his shoulder, he was covering bush after bush, rock after rock, aiming at every denser shadow. All at once, and quite involuntarily, his forefinger crooked, and the rifle

spoke and flamed. The canyons roared back the echo, tossing it out far over the desert in a rippling, widening wave of sound.

McTeague lowered the rifle hastily, with an exclamation of dismay.

"You fool," he said to himself, "you fool. You've done it now. They could hear that miles away. You've done it now."

He stood listening intently, the rifle smoking in his hands. The last echo died away. The smoke vanished, the vast silence closed upon the passing echoes of the rifle as the ocean closes upon a ship's wake. Nothing moved; yet McTeague bestirred himself sharply, rolling up his blankets, resaddling the mule, getting his outfit together again. From time to time he muttered:

"Hurry now; hurry on. You fool, you've done it now. They could hear that miles away. Hurry now. They ain't far off now."

As he depressed the lever of the rifle to reload it, he found that the magazine was empty. He clapped his hands to his sides, feeling rapidly first in one pocket, then in another. He had forgotten to take extra cartridges with him. McTeague swore under his breath as he flung the rifle away. Henceforth he must travel unarmed.

A little more water had gathered in the mud hole near which he had camped. He watered the mule for the last time and wet the sacks around the canary's cage. Then once more he set forward.

But there was a change in the direction of McTeague's flight. Hitherto he had held to the south, keeping upon the very edge of the hills; now he turned sharply at right angles. The slope fell away beneath his hurrying feet; the sage-brush dwindled, and at length ceased; the sand gave place to a fine powder, white as snow; and an hour after he had fired the rifle his mule's hoofs were crisping and cracking the sun-baked flakes of alkali on the surface of Death Valley.

Tracked and harried, as he felt himself to be, from one camping place to another, McTeague had suddenly resolved to make one last effort to rid himself of the enemy that seemed to hang upon his heels. He would strike straight out into that horrible wilderness where even the beasts were afraid. He would cross Death Valley at once and put its arid wastes between him and his pursuer.

"You don't dare follow me now," he muttered, as he hurried on. "Let's see you come out HERE after me."

He hurried on swiftly, urging the mule to a rapid racking walk. Towards four o'clock the sky in front of him began to flush pink and golden. McTeague halted and breakfasted, pushing on again immediately afterward. The dawn flamed and glowed like a brazier, and the sun rose a vast red-hot coal floating in fire. An hour passed, then another, and another. It was about nine o'clock. Once more the dentist paused, and stood panting and blowing, his arms dangling, his eyes screwed up and blinking as he looked about him.

Far behind him the Panamint hills were already but blue hummocks on the horizon. Before him and upon either side, to the north and to the east and to the south, stretched primordial desolation. League upon league the infinite reaches of dazzling white alkali laid themselves out like an immeasurable scroll unrolled from horizon to horizon; not a bush, not a twig relieved that horrible monotony. Even the sand of the desert would have been a welcome sight; a single clump of sage-brush would have fascinated the eye; but this was worse than the desert. It was abominable, this hideous sink of alkali, this bed of some primeval lake lying so far below the level of the ocean. The great mountains of Placer County had been merely indifferent to man; but this awful sink of alkali was openly and unreservedly iniquitous and malignant.

McTeague had told himself that the heat upon the lower slopes of the Panamint had been dreadful; here in Death Valley it became a thing of terror. There was no longer any shadow but his own. He was scorched and parched from head to heel. It seemed to him that the smart of his tortured body could not have been keener if he had been flayed.

"If it gets much hotter," he muttered, wringing the sweat from his thick fell of hair and mustache, "if it gets much hotter, I don' know what I'll do." He was thirsty, and drank a little from his canteen. "I ain't got any too much water," he murmured, shaking the canteen. "I got to get out of this place in a hurry, sure."

By eleven o'clock the heat had increased to such an extent that McTeague could feel the burning of the ground come pringling and stinging through the soles of his boots. Every step he took threw up clouds of impalpable alkali dust, salty and choking, so that he strangled and coughed and sneezed with it.

"LORD! what a country!" exclaimed the dentist.

An hour later, the mule stopped and lay down, his jaws wide open, his ears dangling. McTeague washed his mouth with a handful of water and for a second time since sunrise wetted the flour-sacks around the bird cage. The air was quivering and palpitating like that in the stokehold of a steamship. The sun, small and contracted, swam molten overhead.

"I can't stand it," said McTeague at length. "I'll have to stop and make some kinda shade."

The mule was crouched upon the ground, panting rapidly, with half-closed eyes. The dentist removed the saddle, and unrolling his blanket, propped it up as best he could between him and the sun. As he stooped down to crawl beneath it, his palm touched the ground. He snatched it away with a cry of pain. The surface alkali was oven-hot; he was obliged to scoop out a trench in it before he dared to lie down.

By degrees the dentist began to doze. He had had little or no sleep the night before, and the hurry of his flight under the blazing sun had exhausted him. But his rest was broken; between waking and sleeping, all manner of troublous images galloped through his brain. He thought he was back in the Panamint hills again with Cribbens. They had just discovered the mine and were returning toward camp. McTeague saw himself as another man, striding along over the sand and sagebrush. At once he saw himself stop and wheel sharply about, peering back suspiciously.

There was something behind him; something was following him. He looked, as it were, over the shoulder of this other McTeague, and saw down there, in the half light of the canyon, something dark crawling upon the ground, an indistinct gray figure, man or brute, he did not know. Then he saw another, and another; then another. A score of black, crawling objects were following him, crawling from bush to bush, converging upon him. "THEY" were after him, were closing in upon him, were within touch of his hand, were at his feet -- WERE AT HIS THROAT.

McTeague jumped up with a shout, oversetting the blanket. There was nothing in sight. For miles around, the alkali was empty, solitary, quivering and shimmering under the pelting fire of the afternoon's sun.

But once more the spur bit into his body, goading him on. There was to be no rest, no going back, no pause, no stop. Hurry, hurry, hurry on. The brute that in him slept so close to the surface was alive and alert, and tugging to be gone. There was no resisting that instinct. The brute felt an enemy, scented the trackers, clamored and struggled and fought, and would not be gainsaid.

"I CAN'T go on," groaned McTeague, his eyes sweeping the horizon behind him, "I'm beat out. I'm dog tired. I ain't slept any for two nights." But for all that he roused himself again, saddled the mule, scarcely less exhausted than himself, and pushed on once more over the scorching alkali and under the blazing sun.

From that time on the fear never left him, the spur never ceased to bite, the instinct that goaded him to fight never was dumb; hurry or halt, it was all the same. On he went, straight on, chasing the receding horizon; flagellated with heat; tortured with thirst; crouching over; looking furtively behind, and at times reaching his hand forward, the fingers prehensile, grasping, as it were, toward the horizon, that always fled before him.

The sun set upon the third day of McTeague's flight, night came on, the stars burned slowly into the cool dark purple of the sky. The gigantic sink of white alkali glowed like snow. McTeague, now far into the desert, held steadily on, swinging forward with great strides. His enormous strength held him doggedly to his work. Sullenly, with his huge jaws gripping stolidly together, he pushed on. At midnight he stopped.

"Now," he growled, with a certain desperate defiance, as though he expected to be heard, "now, I'm going to lay up and get some sleep. You can come or not."

He cleared away the hot surface alkali, spread out his blanket, and slept until the next day's heat aroused him. His water was so low that he dared not make coffee now, and so breakfasted without it. Until ten o'clock he tramped forward, then camped again in the shade of one of the rare rock ledges, and "lay up" during the heat of the day. By five o'clock he was once more on the march.

He travelled on for the greater part of that night, stopping only once towards three in the morning to water the mule from the canteen. Again the red-hot day burned up over the horizon. Even at six o'clock it was hot.

"It's going to be worse than ever to-day," he groaned. "I wish I could find another rock to camp by. Ain't I ever going to get out of this place?"

There was no change in the character of the desert. Always the same measureless leagues of white-hot alkali stretched away toward the horizon on every hand. Here and there the flat, dazzling surface of the desert broke and raised into long low mounds, from the summit of which McTeague could look for miles and miles over its horrible desolation. No shade was in sight. Not a rock, not a stone broke the monotony of the ground. Again and again he ascended the low unevennesses, looking and searching for a camping place, shading his eyes from the glitter of sand and sky.

He tramped forward a little farther, then paused at length in a hollow between two breaks, resolving to make camp there.

Suddenly there was a shout.

"Hands up. By damn, I got the drop on you!"

McTeague looked up.

It was Marcus.

Chapter 22

Within a month after his departure from San Francisco, Marcus had "gone in on a cattle ranch" in the Panamint Valley with an Englishman, an acquaintance of Mr. Sieppe's. His headquarters were at a place called Modoc, at the lower extremity of the valley, about fifty miles by trail to the south of Keeler.

His life was the life of a cowboy. He realized his former vision of himself, booted, sombreroed, and revolvered, passing his days in the saddle and the better part of his nights around the poker tables in Modoc's one saloon. To his intense satisfaction he even involved himself in a gun fight that arose over a disputed brand, with the result that two fingers of his left hand were shot away.

News from the outside world filtered slowly into the Panamint Valley, and the telegraph had never been built beyond Keeler. At intervals one of the local papers of Independence, the nearest large town, found its way into the cattle camps on the ranges, and occasionally one of the Sunday editions of a Sacramento journal, weeks old, was passed from hand to hand. Marcus ceased to hear from the Sieppes. As for San Francisco, it was as far from him as was London or Vienna.

One day, a fortnight after McTeague's flight from San Francisco, Marcus rode into Modoc, to find a group of men gathered about a notice affixed to the outside of the Wells-Fargo office. It was an offer of reward for the arrest and apprehension of a murderer. The crime had been committed in San Francisco, but the man wanted had been traced as far as the western portion of

Inyo County, and was believed at that time to be in hiding in either the Pinto or Panamint hills, in the vicinity of Keeler.

Marcus reached Keeler on the afternoon of that same day. Half a mile from the town his pony fell and died from exhaustion. Marcus did not stop even to remove the saddle. He arrived in the barroom of the hotel in Keeler just after the posse had been made up. The sheriff, who had come down from Independence that morning, at first refused his offer of assistance. He had enough men already -- too many, in fact. The country travelled through would be hard, and it would be difficult to find water for so many men and horses.

"But none of you fellers have ever seen um," vociferated Marcus, quivering with excitement and wrath. "I know um well. I could pick um out in a million. I can identify um, and you fellers can't. And I knew -- I knew -- good GOD! I knew that girl -- his wife -- in Frisco. She's a cousin of mine, she is -- she was -- I thought once of -- This thing's a personal matter of mine -- an' that money he got away with, that five thousand, belongs to me by rights. Oh, never mind, I'm going along. Do you hear?" he shouted, his fists raised, "I'm going along, I tell you. There ain't a man of you big enough to stop me. Let's see you try and stop me going. Let's see you once, any two of you." He filled the barroom with his clamor.

"Lord love you, come along, then," said the sheriff.

The posse rode out of Keeler that same night. The keeper of the general merchandise store, from whom Marcus had borrowed a second pony, had informed them that Cribbens and his partner, whose description tallied exactly with that given in the notice of reward, had outfitted at his place with a view to prospecting in the Panamint hills. The posse trailed them at once to their first camp at the head of the valley. It was an easy matter. It was only necessary to inquire of the cowboys and range riders of the valley if they had seen and noted the passage of two men, one of whom carried a bird cage.

Beyond this first camp the trail was lost, and a week was wasted in a bootless search around the mine at Gold Gulch, whither it seemed probable the partners had gone. Then a travelling peddler, who included Gold Gulch in his route, brought in the news of a wonderful strike of gold-bearing quartz some ten miles to the south on the western slope of the range. Two men from Keeler had made a strike, the peddler had said, and added the curious detail that one of the men had a canary bird in a cage with him.

The posse made Cribbens's camp three days after the unaccountable disappearance of his partner. Their man was gone, but the narrow hoof prints of a mule, mixed with those of huge hob-nailed boots, could be plainly followed in the sand. Here they picked up the trail and held to it steadily till the point was reached where, instead of tending southward it swerved abruptly to the east. The men could hardly believe their eyes.

"It ain't reason," exclaimed the sheriff. "What in thunder is he up to? This beats me. Cutting out into Death Valley at this time of year."

"He's heading for Gold Mountain over in the Armagosa, sure."

The men decided that this conjecture was true. It was the only inhabited locality in that direction. A discussion began as to the further movements of the posse.

"I don't figure on going into that alkali sink with no eight men and horses," declared the sheriff. "One man can't carry enough water to take him and his mount across, let alone EIGHT. No, sir. Four couldn't do it. No, THREE couldn't. We've got to make a circuit round the valley and come up on the other side and head him off at Gold Mountain. That's what we got to do, and ride like hell to do it, too."

But Marcus protested with all the strength of his lungs against abandoning the trail now that they had found it. He argued that they were but a day and a half behind their man now. There was no possibility of their missing the trail -- as distinct in the white alkali as in snow. They could make a dash into the valley, secure their man, and return long before their water failed them. He, for one, would not give up the pursuit, now that they were so close. In the haste of the departure from Keeler the sheriff had neglected to swear him in. He was under no orders. He would do as he pleased.

"Go on, then, you darn fool," answered the sheriff. "We'll cut on round the valley, for all that. It's a gamble he'll be at Gold Mountain before you're half way across. But if you catch him, here" -- he tossed Marcus a pair of handcuffs -- "put 'em on him and bring him back to Keeler."

Two days after he had left the posse, and when he was already far out in the desert, Marcus's horse gave out. In the fury of his impatience he had spurred mercilessly forward on the trail, and on the morning of the third day found that his horse was unable to move. The joints of his legs seemed locked rigidly. He would go his own length, stumbling and interfering, then collapse helplessly upon the ground with a pitiful groan. He was used up.

Marcus believed himself to be close upon McTeague now. The ashes at his last camp had still been smoldering. Marcus took what supplies of food and water he could carry, and hurried on. But McTeague was farther ahead than he had guessed, and by evening of his third day upon the desert Marcus, raging with thirst, had drunk his last mouthful of water and had flung away the empty canteen.

"If he ain't got water with um," he said to himself as he pushed on, "If he ain't got water with um, by damn! I'll be in a bad way. I will, for a fact."

* * * * *

At Marcus's shout McTeague looked up and around him. For the instant he saw no one. The white glare of alkali was still unbroken. Then his swiftly rolling eyes lighted upon a head and shoulder that protruded above the low crest of the break directly in front of him. A man was there, lying at full length upon the ground, covering him with a revolver. For a few seconds McTeague looked at the man stupidly, bewildered, confused, as yet without definite thought. Then he noticed that the man was singularly like Marcus Schouler. It WAS Marcus Schouler. How in the world did Marcus Schouler come to be in that desert? What did he mean by pointing a pistol at him that way? He'd best look out or the pistol would go off. Then his thoughts

readjusted themselves with a swiftness born of a vivid sense of danger. Here was the enemy at last, the tracker he had felt upon his footsteps. Now at length he had "come on" and shown himself, after all those days of skulking. McTeague was glad of it. He'd show him now. They two would have it out right then and there. His rifle! He had thrown it away long since. He was helpless. Marcus had ordered him to put up his hands. If he did not, Marcus would kill him. He had the drop on him. McTeague stared, scowling fiercely at the levelled pistol. He did not move.

"Hands up!" shouted Marcus a second time. "I'll give you three to do it in. One, two -- -- "

Instinctively McTeague put his hands above his head.

Marcus rose and came towards him over the break.

"Keep 'em up," he cried. "If you move 'em once I'll kill you, sure."

He came up to McTeague and searched him, going through his pockets; but McTeague had no revolver; not even a hunting knife.

"What did you do with that money, with that five thousand dollars?"

"It's on the mule," answered McTeague, sullenly.

Marcus grunted, and cast a glance at the mule, who was standing some distance away, snorting nervously, and from time to time flattening his long ears.

"Is that it there on the horn of the saddle, there in that canvas sack?" Marcus demanded.

"Yes, that's it."

A gleam of satisfaction came into Marcus's eyes, and under his breath he muttered:

"Got it at last."

He was singularly puzzled to know what next to do. He had got McTeague. There he stood at length, with his big hands over his head, scowling at him sullenly. Marcus had caught his enemy, had run down the man for whom every officer in the State had been looking. What should he do with him now? He couldn't keep him standing there forever with his hands over his head.

"Got any water?" he demanded.

"There's a canteen of water on the mule."

Marcus moved toward the mule and made as if to reach the bridle-rein. The mule squealed, threw up his head, and galloped to a little distance, rolling his eyes and flattening his ears.

Marcus swore wrathfully.

"He acted that way once before," explained McTeague, his hands still in the air. "He ate some loco-weed back in the hills before I started."

For a moment Marcus hesitated. While he was catching the mule McTeague might get away. But where to, in heaven's name? A rat could not hide on the surface of that glistening alkali, and besides, all McTeague's store of provisions and his priceless supply of water were on the mule. Marcus ran after the mule, revolver in hand, shouting and cursing. But the mule would not be caught. He acted as if possessed, squealing, lashing out, and galloping in wide circles, his head high in the air.

"Come on," shouted Marcus, furious, turning back to McTeague. "Come on, help me catch him. We got to catch him. All the water we got is on the saddle."

McTeague came up.

"He's eatun some loco-weed," he repeated. "He went kinda crazy once before."

"If he should take it into his head to bolt and keep on running -- -- "

Marcus did not finish. A sudden great fear seemed to widen around and inclose the two men. Once their water gone, the end would not be long.

"We can catch him all right," said the dentist. "I caught him once before."

"Oh, I guess we can catch him," answered Marcus, reassuringly.

Already the sense of enmity between the two had weakened in the face of a common peril. Marcus let down the hammer of his revolver and slid it back into the holster.

The mule was trotting on ahead, snorting and throwing up great clouds of alkali dust. At every step the canvas sack jingled, and McTeague's bird cage, still wrapped in the flour-bags, bumped against the saddlepads. By and by the mule stopped, blowing out his nostrils excitedly.

"He's clean crazy," fumed Marcus, panting and swearing.

"We ought to come up on him quiet," observed McTeague.

"I'll try and sneak up," said Marcus; "two of us would scare him again. You stay here."

Marcus went forward a step at a time. He was almost within arm's length of the bridle when the mule shied from him abruptly and galloped away.

Marcus danced with rage, shaking his fists, and swearing horribly. Some hundred yards away the mule paused and began blowing and snuffing in the alkali as though in search of feed. Then, for no reason, he shied again, and started off on a jog trot toward the east.

"We've GOT to follow him," exclaimed Marcus as McTeague came up. "There's no water within seventy miles of here."

Then began an interminable pursuit. Mile after mile, under the terrible heat of the desert sun, the two men followed the mule, racked with a thirst that grew fiercer every hour. A dozen times they could almost touch the canteen of water, and as often the distraught animal shied away and fled before them. At length Marcus cried:

"It's no use, we can't catch him, and we're killing ourselves with thirst. We got to take our chances." He drew his revolver from its holster, cocked it, and crept forward.

"Steady, now," said McTeague; "it won' do to shoot through the canteen."

Within twenty yards Marcus paused, made a rest of his left forearm and fired.

"You GOT him," cried McTeague. "No, he's up again. Shoot him again. He's going to bolt."

Marcus ran on, firing as he ran. The mule, one foreleg trailing, scrambled along, squealing and snorting. Marcus fired his last shot. The mule pitched forward upon his head, then, rolling sideways, fell upon the canteen, bursting it open and spilling its entire contents into the sand.

Marcus and McTeague ran up, and Marcus snatched the battered canteen from under the reeking, bloody hide. There was no water left. Marcus flung the canteen from him and stood up, facing McTeague. There was a pause.

"We're dead men," said Marcus.

McTeague looked from him out over the desert. Chaotic desolation stretched from them on either hand, flaming and glaring with the afternoon heat. There was the brazen sky and the leagues upon leagues of alkali, leper white. There was nothing more. They were in the heart of Death Valley.

"Not a drop of water," muttered McTeague; "not a drop of water."

"We can drink the mule's blood," said Marcus. "It's been done before. But -- but -- " he looked down at the quivering, gory body -- "but I ain't thirsty enough for that yet."

"Where's the nearest water?"

"Well, it's about a hundred miles or more back of us in the Panamint hills," returned Marcus, doggedly. "We'd be crazy long before we reached it. I tell you, we're done for, by damn, we're DONE for. We ain't ever going to get outa here."

"Done for?" murmured the other, looking about stupidly. "Done for, that's the word. Done for? Yes, I guess we're done for."

"What are we going to do NOW?" exclaimed Marcus, sharply, after a while.

"Well, let's -- let's be moving along -- somewhere."

"WHERE, I'd like to know? What's the good of moving on?"

"What's the good of stopping here?"

There was a silence.

"Lord, it's hot," said the dentist, finally, wiping his forehead with the back of his hand. Marcus ground his teeth.

"Done for," he muttered; "done for."

"I never WAS so thirsty," continued McTeague. "I'm that dry I can hear my tongue rubbing against the roof of my mouth."

"Well, we can't stop here," said Marcus, finally; "we got to go somewhere. We'll try and get back, but it ain't no manner of use. Anything we want to take along with us from the mule? We can -- -- "

Suddenly he paused. In an instant the eyes of the two doomed men had met as the same thought simultaneously rose in their minds. The canvas sack with its five thousand dollars was still tied to the horn of the saddle.

Marcus had emptied his revolver at the mule, and though he still wore his cartridge belt, he was for the moment as unarmed as McTeague.

"I guess," began McTeague coming forward a step, "I guess, even if we are done for, I'll take -- some of my truck along."

"Hold on," exclaimed Marcus, with rising aggressiveness. "Let's talk about that. I ain't so sure about who that -- who that money belongs to."

"Well, I AM, you see," growled the dentist.

The old enmity between the two men, their ancient hate, was flaming up again.

"Don't try an' load that gun either," cried McTeague, fixing Marcus with his little eyes.

"Then don't lay your finger on that sack," shouted the other. "You're my prisoner, do you understand? You'll do as I say." Marcus had drawn the handcuffs from his pocket, and stood

ready with his revolver held as a club. "You soldiered me out of that money once, and played me for a sucker, an' it's my turn now. Don't you lay your finger on that sack."

Marcus barred McTeague's way, white with passion. McTeague did not answer. His eyes drew to two fine, twinkling points, and his enormous hands knotted themselves into fists, hard as wooden mallets. He moved a step nearer to Marcus, then another.

Suddenly the men grappled, and in another instant were rolling and struggling upon the hot white ground. McTeague thrust Marcus backward until he tripped and fell over the body of the dead mule. The little bird cage broke from the saddle with the violence of their fall, and rolled out upon the ground, the flour-bags slipping from it. McTeague tore the revolver from Marcus's grip and struck out with it blindly. Clouds of alkali dust, fine and pungent, enveloped the two fighting men, all but strangling them.

McTeague did not know how he killed his enemy, but all at once Marcus grew still beneath his blows. Then there was a sudden last return of energy. McTeague's right wrist was caught, something licked upon it, then the struggling body fell limp and motionless with a long breath.

As McTeague rose to his feet, he felt a pull at his right wrist; something held it fast. Looking down, he saw that Marcus in that last struggle had found strength to handcuff their wrists together. Marcus was dead now; McTeague was locked to the body. All about him, vast interminable, stretched the measureless leagues of Death Valley.

McTeague remained stupidly looking around him, now at the distant horizon, now at the ground, now at the half-dead canary chattering feebly in its little gilt prison.

END

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